





# ***PIRATE OF THE NORTH***

*What this story is about :*

When the Indian guide left nineteen-year-old Jack Lauson at the cabin in the Quehatch Valley, he murmured a solemn warning. For there was a legendary curse on the valley—every man who had come in search of gold or furs had met with strange misfortunes. And this lonely cabin was to be Jack's home for the winter, a self-imposed test of his courage and endurance.

As the snows fell, Jack soon learned the meaning of the Indian's prophecy. This part of the Yukon was the undisputed domain of the moose, the bear, the wolf, and above all of the evil wolverine. Cunning and cautious, this prowling pirate robbed traps of bait and captives and was as elusive as a shadow.

Fighting cold and hunger, Jack relentlessly tracked the wolverine through the valley of the Quehatch, and the unexpected end of the quest brought him a new feeling of maturity.







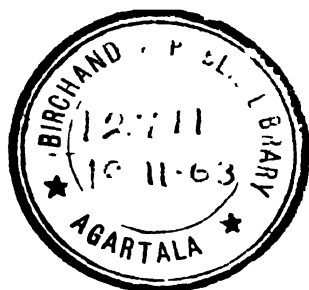
WELL, WELL, **W**ITH BRIGHT EYES

*Pirate of the North*

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# ***PIRATE OF THE NORTH***

***HAROLD McCRACKEN***



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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
FOREWORD . . . . .	7
I "THIS IS MY VALLEY" . . . . .	11
II A DISPUTED DOMAIN . . . . .	25
III CONQUEST IN THE NIGHT . . . . .	38
IV SURVIVAL OF THE STRONGEST . . . . .	52
V READING THE SIGNS . . . . .	70
VI WHEN WINTER COMES . . . . .	89
VII ENEMY TRAILS THAT CROSS . . . . .	105
VIII A DIFFICULT TASK . . . . .	120
IX ILL OMENS . . . . .	133
X MISFORTUNE STRIKES QUICKLY . . . . .	145
XI WHEN THE COLD IS CRUEL . . . . .	162
XII A NEW CHANCE . . . . .	179
XIII END OF A TRAIL . . . . .	193
XIV "QUE-QUE-HATCH!" . . . . .	211
XV DEFIANT IN DEFEAT . . . . .	227
XVI A BLANKET ON THE SNOW . . . . .	245



## FOREWORD

THIS is the story of a young Alaskan's mid-winter experiences in a beautiful valley of the mountains of the Far North. The Indians and the back-country men shunned the place, for they believed it was haunted by evil spirits that preyed upon those who trespassed to get the gold or the fur. The valley was also the home of a considerable number of wild creatures. There were grizzly, wolves, wolverine, moose, mountain sheep, beaver, marten, fox, lynx, weasel and others. Jack Lauson became pretty well acquainted with some of these, and got something of an insight into the constant struggles for existence and survival which always governs the lives of animals in such a wilderness community. He also had some serious difficulties of his own and learned there was more fact than fiction in the legends about the valley.

The primary objective of this book is to entertain and to excite a deeper interest in the creatures of the wilds. But there is also something which goes far beyond ; and it is believed the reader may find a deeper interest if he keeps

in mind some of the following basic facts which have guided me in my efforts.

It should be remembered that the relationship between man and animals goes back a million years or more—to a time when we shared the wilderness on a more or less equal basis. Through the ages we have persistently hunted our wild neighbours, for food, clothing and sport, and captured them for domestication and our various needs. In recent years we have “stuffed” their skins and put them in glass cases in museums for the curious to stare at ; and we have made some rather superficial studies, going little further than a scientific classification into species and divisions of species, principally from the examination of their bones. But in spite of all this million years of association, and all our amazing advancement in the fields of culture and the many other phases of human development, we have acquired a very small amount of real knowledge of animal life.

Primitive man had some interesting ideas about animals, giving them credit for having characteristics in common with himself. Among the American Indians there was a time when certain of the tribesmen were supposed to be able to carry on conversations with animals ; and there are a number of traditions which claim a family relationship in the more distant past.



To the Cree Indians of the Western Plains the grizzly bear, for example, was known as "four-legged human;" the Ojibways called him "grandfather;" and among other tribes he was referred to as "cousin," "elder brother," "old man" and similar names.

The physical similarities between the various human races today are so broad and complete that under the skin there are no differences at all; and while man walks erect, instead of on all fours, and has developed a thousand phases to his civilization, his physical make-up has a surprising amount in common with the animals. Of all the two hundred bones in the human skeleton, virtually every one has a counterpart in the mammals with which we have shared existence on this small planet. We both have the same bones in our fingers and toes, only man has fingernails and toenails instead of claws; there are the same number of bones in the neck of the giraffe as there are in the lion, bear and yourself; and we all have the same bones, of the same shape, in arms, legs, ribs and spinal column. All the organs of the body are also the same and have exactly the same function. All hearts and their elaborate system of carrying blood throughout the body are the same. Man can take no credit for inventing his heart, or his stomach, or any of his senses.

They have been developed by Nature, through millions of years of past generations. Nature did not put a brain inside the skulls of man and mammals just to fill up an empty cavity, or to serve man for a different purpose than the other living creatures. If animals did not use their brains, in much the same way that we do, that organ of their body would have dried up and disappeared long long ago—just as the rudimentary tail at the end of the human spinal column has practically disappeared.

These facts are not set down here for the purpose of propounding any great theory, but just as simple statements to be kept in mind while reading this book. By so doing, it is hoped the reader may better get a feeling that the wild creatures who become a part of the story are something more than just dumb animals; each has a little world all its own—just as you and I have.

HAROLD McCRACKEN.

## CHAPTER I

### “ THIS IS MY VALLEY ”

THE sun had slipped down behind the white ramparts of the mountains, shooting golden spears of light overhead across the valley ; and behind this display the immaculate sky was becoming festooned with patterns of delicate shades of pink, orange, and here and there a touch of bright red. Already a few of the larger stars had begun to sparkle. The big valley below was flooded with that strange afterglow of a late autumn evening in the far north—softly brilliant and intensely clear. The lofty mountaintops seemed little more than arm's-length away ; and the landscape, richly decorated by the paintbrush of autumn, appeared far more colourful than ever before. Not a breath of a breeze was stirring. The whole scene was a nocturn of beauty and quietude. It was extremely difficult to think of the Quehatch Valley as a place of violent struggle and tragedy.

Jack Lauson came out of the squat little wilderness cabin and walked slowly to the stream that flowed in front of it. Stepping out on to a large flat rock, worn smooth as an eggshell

through eons of time, he stood for a few moments looking up into the radiant display in the sky. He stood relaxed and motionless as he gazed, although his long strong fingers tightened a bit on the towel he held in one hand. The faint touch of a smile crept into his youthful, dark-skinned face. The evening afterglow gave a glossy sheen to his shock of jet black hair and lit up the strong features of a face in which the finest characteristics of Indian and white man were moulded as only a blending of strong bloods can be.

Tossing the towel back on the dry rocks of the shore, he rolled up the sleeves of his heavy wool undershirt, and squatting down he made a cup of his hands and dipped them repeatedly into the clear water to satisfy his thirst. Then he vigorously washed his face, neck, and arms. The water was icy cold, fresh from the big glacier at the head of the valley, and he blew and puffed like a walrus, as he doused handful after handful into his face and rubbed wet hands through his hair, around his ears and the back of his neck. It brought a glow of healthy pink through the brown skin and a sparkle into the clear blue eyes. His whole body became invigorated. Standing upright he peeled off the heavy undershirt and tossed it back on to the rocks beside the towel, and squatting down

again he dashed the cold water on to his chest and broad shoulders. “It’s wonderful water . . .” he thought to himself, between puffs and deep breaths. “If it was deep enough . . . and not quite so darn cold . . . I’d go clear in. Pf-f-f! It’s fine!”

Stepping more briskly back on to the shore he picked up the towel and stood upright while he rubbed himself vigorously. As he did so his eyes wandered out over the timbered valley and up into the high mountains which rose in every direction. Once again he noticed the beauty which the sunset was adding overhead, and the colourful changes which had taken place since he had looked upward a short time before. Then his gaze dropped farther down, where the fresh white snowline stretched all around just above the edge of timber. “Bet there’s lots of mountain sheep up there . . .” His lips moved with the thought. “I’ll have mountain mutton for Thanksgiving.”

Then his head turned quickly. From back on the mountainside came the deep grunt of a big bull moose, followed from across the valley by the long-drawn-out quavering bawl of a cow moose. They broke the silence with a startling harshness. “This is a grand place!” He spoke half aloud now. “It can’t be as bad a place as they say.” His thoughts were

divided between vagaries and the calls of the moose.

He vividly recalled the giant bull he and the old Indian guide had seen only a little way below the cabin, as they trudged wearily under the brutal packs. He had seen a lot of moose, but never a bull with such a magnificent spread of antlers. "Must have been well over seventy-two inches," he thought, "and goodness knows how many points." Close as they had been to the giant animal, it had only stood stiff and majestic, staring at them.

"Hi, Henry!" he had called out to the animal, with a boyish chuckle.

"Beeg one!" the old Indian had whispered.

Just why Jack had called this bull moose Henry, or how he had come to speak aloud, he didn't know. "Interesting neighbours I'm going to have." This thought he had kept to himself—and he determined to get better acquainted with Henry, as soon as he got settled. He also now recalled the number of grizzly tracks they had seen. He would look into that, too, before all of these big hairy creatures had climbed up the mountain for the long sleep in their cosy winter dens.

"No . . . there is nothing wrong with this place at all." He still seemed to be arguing a point, as he turned his attention away from the

moose call and his eyes returned to wander in one direction and then another. But why had the Indian crossed himself. What had he mumbled under his breath, like a prayer? And what had been the meaning of that strange look in his smoky eyes as he turned and went silently back down the valley, after he had brought in the last load of supplies. Jack's understanding of the Indians ran far deeper than knowing their language. He had inherited that from his mother, in full measure. Outwardly, he had gained more from his father; but deep down inside there was a lot of the old-time chiefs of the *Tenan Kutchin*—the people of the mountains. The Indians understood this, and that was why they liked Jack Lauson—particularly the older men and women. His own Indian intuition had often assured him of this. It had always been a rather pleasant feeling. But there was something coldly apprehensive and a bit fearful about the Indian crossing himself and whispering a prayer as he left young Lauson alone in the valley . . . and there was nothing pleasant about the feeling it left behind.

Jack knew the story of Quehatch Valley. He had heard it told a good many times, going back about as long as he could remember. He knew it was believed by Indians and white men alike

. . . although somehow he had been a little inclined to put it in the class of other Alaskan fables that were so often told to the tourists—like the one of the beautiful Indian princess who for many centuries had been preserved in all her charming reality in the clear ice of a glacier. But the story of the Quehatch was not told to tourists.

He was aware of all the significance of the name—a rather crude adaptation of the Indian "*qui-qui-hatch*," which is their designation of the wolverine. But there was much more wrapped up in the name than meets the ear and it was all synonymous with the evil characteristics of that reprehensible little beast of the northern wilderness—symbol of death and destruction, and evasion of all justice by uncanny cunning. There were several good and valid reasons why the valley had been shunned by Indians and white men alike—in spite of the fact there was known to be an abundance of marten, fox, lynx, ermine and some beaver, all of unusually good quality ; and there was also gold in the valley.

No Indian had trapped the Quehatch for so many winters that no one was sure who the last one was. The reason for this was well established. No matter how many fur bearers a trapper caught and no matter how early he



visited his sets, it was seldom that anything was left but shreds of pelt and red stains on the snow. The unusual number of wolverines accounted for that—and thus the valley had got its name, a long time ago. Some of the best of the Indian trappers had pitted their skill against these ghostlike raiders, but they had only been insulted by stolen baits and overturned traps, no matter what devices of deception were used. The wolverine is known throughout its wide range in the North as the most elusive of all the furred creatures, as well as an incarnate pirate of destruction ; but those of the Quehatch must have been the ones who had taught all the others their clever and contemptible tricks—and kept a few special ones for their own particular use.

The wolverines were only part of the story. The gold of the Quehatch ran rich and coarse and pure. Everyone knew about it. But the gold was like the fur—it was as evasive as the foot of a rainbow. One of the banks in Fairbanks had a nugget fully as large as a hen's egg, that had been dug out almost in front of the sod-roofed little cabin where Jack Lauson had come to live. If you held this nugget in a special way, and used a little imagination, it resembled a human skull. It was not the only large nugget that had come out of the valley,

but it was the only one that had been kept as a souvenir and the one they generally talked about. It had been found by two prospectors, about ten years ago. Dug out close to the surface, it was all they got for their summer's work ; and when about to abandon the futile undertaking, they had fought over possession of the nugget. The one who survived is still serving a lifelong sentence in prison.

Engineers had carefully examined the Quehatch. They estimated there were several million dollars in free gold lying scattered on bedrock beneath the stream that flowed through the valley. Any prospector who dug down might scoop up more wealth than he could ever live long enough to spend. But the Quehatch had its ironical ways of frustrating human beings. In the deepest places it was only about thirty feet to bedrock. That in itself was no problem to a prospector. But the whole distance from the surface to the solid bottom, on which the free gold always settles, was a tangled mass of big boulders that were much too heavy to be moved by hand. It was too expensive a gamble even for modern machinery. Many an eager prospector had lain awake at night trying to figure some way of getting to bedrock on the Quehatch. Three Swedes had brought dynamite in on horseback. They lost a horse in

quicksand going in ; the wolves hamstringed another. The first blast they set off caused the death of one of the partners. The others decided to go on with the undertaking. Shortly afterward they both suffered a severe case of ptomaine poisoning, evidently from canned food. They were just down to bedrock when a cave-in let the surrounding boulders slide into the excavation, destroying all their back-breaking work and crushing the leg of one of them so badly he had to be rushed out to the hospital on their one remaining pack horse. They brought out about a thousand dollars worth of coarse gold—which hardly paid for the lost horses, supplies and doctors' bills. Through the years, others had tried. They had all found gold—but none had made anything of a profit and they all had suffered some sort of dire misfortune or tragedy.

On two occasions white men had undertaken to trap the Quehatch. They were both good men, with a lot of experience in the North. When the first of these did not come out by the end of June, a U.S. Deputy Marshal went in to see about it. In the cabin he found a pot of moose stew on the stove and the table set with clean dishes. It appeared that the man had put the place in order before going out in the morning. The snowshoes were gone ; and

from the small amount of supplies that had been used, it was evident he had been in the valley but a short time. Several days were spent searching the valley. A number of his traps were found, but not the slightest trace of the man himself.

The other trapper had come out in the middle of winter. While he had been setting a heavy No. 4 trap for a wolverine, it went off, catching his hand and breaking the bones in two fingers. By the time he got to town both his hands and feet were so badly frostbitten he almost lost them. There were even more serious effects of his stay in the Quehatch. Not only did the wolverines plague his every effort at trapping, but the thoughts of walking every day only thirty feet over a fabulous fortune in free gold, which could be all his own if he could but devise some way to get down that short distance to it, was too much for him. Every night he would lie awake thinking about the gold and what he could do with it—until it almost drove him mad. "And that place is haunted!" he had cried out from his hospital bed. "It's full of ghosts . . . all fightin' the wolverines . . . and diggin' for gold!" Then his voice had trailed off, "But none of 'em ever catch the wolverines . . . and none of 'em ever get down to the gold."



Thus over a long period of time had grown the legend of the Quehatch—a legend that was not a legend, but a series of stark realities far too real for anyone to deny. The place had been shunned. No one had so much as visited the valley in two or three years. Its wild inhabitants had been left to their own primitive ways, undisturbed, to fight their own struggles for survival ; and the gold was left unchallenged, locked securely beneath the quiet stream of clear, cold, refreshing water.

Jack Lauson had known all this. He had never taken the stories very seriously ; but now, facing a long winter alone in the same little earth-covered cabin where the others had lived, gave everything a new and rather startling significance. As he stood half-consciously pushing the towel up and down over his dry arm, he wondered if he had made a mistake by coming. An Alaskan winter was a long time to spend alone, anywhere, even for one with the deepest enthusiasm for the northern wilderness. He did not need the money from any of the fur he might catch ; and he had no serious intention of trying to get down to the gold. As the only son of fabulous old Alec Lauson, he had never wanted for anything that money could buy. The sturdy Dane's trading posts, stores, river-transportation boats and the many other wide

developments of his rough little empire, through the more than forty years of his successes in the North, had poured more gold into his bank than anyone but the old man himself knew about. Sakhniti, the powerful chief of the Tenan Kutchin Indians, had first loaned him a string of dogs and a sled, on the possession of which Alec got the contract to carry the mail from Seward to Fairbanks. Before the first winter was over he had had six other big dog-team outfits working for him, transporting supplies of all kinds over the five-hundred-mile winter trail, which now the government railway follows. Then he had started his first trading post . . . and married Sakhniti's attractive daughter. It was twenty years before they had their first and only child. By that time Alec Lauson was a wealthy man. He had named the baby boy after the famous lead dog of that first team with which he had begun his conquests . . . and Jack had been raised to be an Alaskan and to follow in the footsteps of his father. The old man had planned it all very methodically, almost from the day Jack was born. His boy should get some schooling and have a good time until he was twenty. Then he must settle down as the partner in the business ; and take over the whole thing as soon as he was able. The end of Jack's prescribed freedom was less

than a year away ; and he had chosen to spend this last winter in the Quehatch.

Turning half round, Jack let his eyes move slowly over his winter home. It was a squat little one-room habitation, in appearance quite a part of its surroundings. The five logs of its low side walls showed the many years since they had been cut, and there was a heavy growth of moss in the chinks between them. The heavy growth of grass in the deep covering of earth over the roof was dead and dishevelled, like the uncombed hair of an old man's head. Beside the small open door lay two heavy packs, where they had been dumped at the end of the last trip over the trail. The loads of the two previous trips had been piled inside. Weary from the long miles over the bad trail, Jack had stretched out on top of the sleeping-bag thrown on the bunk. He had slept heavily and longer than planned ; and there was much that should be done before darkness closed in on the valley. But he was rested and refreshed, and tomorrow he could put the place in order.

“ I'll chop some wood first. . . . ” His eyes moved out to a clump of birches a short distance from the back of the cabin. Then he returned to look over the rusty stove-pipe that stuck up through the roof. “ It'll do for tonight.”

Picking up the undershirt and pulling it over his head, he turned back to let his gaze wander again freely over the wild panorama. Straightening upright, he breathed deeply. The evening air, pungent with the scents of the deep woods, was pleasantly fresh and sweet; and the beauties of the scene which spread so abundantly in every direction made him feel glad he had come. It was a wonderful place . . . just the place he had dreamed of, far away from everything and everyone. "This is my country!" he whispered proudly. "This is my valley!"



## CHAPTER II

### A DISPUTED DOMAIN

THE big bull walked slowly down through the birches which covered a broad bench at the base of the mountain. The ground where he passed was covered with freshly fallen leaves, a bright golden carpet that added reflected lustre of sunset to the bronze giant. He strode with deliberate steps through the chalky-white portal of the trees. His great spread of antlers were tipped back, spreading outward like the ruffled wings of a strutting grouse, carried with just as graceful ease. He moved with remarkable silence and it seemed impossible that he should pass through the thick stand of timber without banging repeatedly against trunks and branches.

Coming out into the open he swung to the left and moved deliberately to the blunt point of a small projection where the edge of the bench dropped abruptly to the flat floor of the valley. From here he could just look over the tops of the tallest trees ; and planting all four of his feet solidly on the moss-covered pedestal of gravel and earth, he raised his great antlers until they were almost straight up. There were

more than eighty points on the two broad horns and they weighed almost ninety pounds, although they seemed weightless, sweeping outward and up from the sides of the animal's elongated forehead. He stood motionless, his rather small eyes staring seriously out over the valley. Even if his eyes had been keen as the eagle's, they could not have pierced the heavy screen of trees. But the big bull had other means of reaching out and searching the floor of the valley. His big ears moved their delicately tuned sounding boards back and forth, independently of each other. His distended nostrils twitched and his sides occasionally quivered, as he drew in the evening air and analysed every little tell-tale scent that it carried. What one sense missed, the other picked up and instantly identified.

Henry stood more than seven feet at the shoulders, and he weighed close to fifteen hundred pounds. He was massive and majestic—but there was nothing beautiful about him. The big, powerful neck, deep chest and high shoulders, surmounted by those unbelievably large antlers, gave him the impressive appearance, although his whole body was powerfully moulded. The forelegs were sturdy but sleek and trim, heavy boned and laced with sinew, with bulging biceps of muscle at the top of each outer side. The hind legs were considerably

heavier. The predominant feature of his elongated head was a boldly protruding, smoothly rounded snout. A broad dulp of hairy hide hung down a good ten inches from the throat. Nature had spent a million years, more or less, in creating him as the largest of all the antlered creatures that ever lived on the earth. There was probably no other individual beast at this moment in time who was his equal. Little wonder was it that he stood with such pompous pride, and gazed, and smelled, and listened with such acute attention to all that went on in the broad valley spread before him.

There is something primitive, even prehistoric, about a big bull. The unusual size, strength and wilderness-wise sagacity of the moose have permitted their survival longer than many species now extinct for thousands of years. They have always chosen to live in the healthiest parts of the earth, and having good habits of feeding and living, they have not been subject to the diseases which have decimated other members of their family and other species. Thus, little changed, they have come down through the ages, from the time of the dinosaur and the ichthyosaurus, when great herds of mammoths and the hairy rhinoceros roamed the Arctic wastes. Like the first Indians who began the human population of North America,

they came across from Asia, shortly after the end of the last Ice Age. In earlier eras, long before the recollections of man, their antlers were somewhat larger ; but through the many centuries of the eternal struggle to survive, in which practically every individual of every species that walks, flies or swims, has always been destined to some tragic end, the moose had survived as a species.

It was the mating season. Of all the periods of the year this was the time when the bulls were most keenly alert and when their fighting strength was most important—the time when they march forth to meet every challenger who dares to defy them in combat. These battles were not mere tests of muscle and sparring skill, but deadly serious, as those of our gladiators and knights of old. Only here the penalty of defeat was often more severe, for other natural enemies generally wait near by to prey upon the vanquished, when badly enough injured in the fight. Deep and inescapable was the urge and the pride of race that brought the great bull out on to the little promontory overlooking the valley, and caused him to stand so erectly with his antlers raised as high as they could be lifted. Stiffening in his tracks and distending his nostrils he uttered a deep grunt that went vibrating out into the quiet evening. Every bird, squirrel,

fox, lynx, wolverine, wolf and bear understood its meaning, as clearly as the other moose to whom it was boldly addressed. It was an unmistakable challenge; and it said proudly and defiantly: "This is my valley!"

He hardly had time to begin listening for a response, when from across the valley came the long-drawn-out bawl of a cow moose. One ear switched in that direction, as he instantly recognized the friendly voice. It was like the encouragement of a lady fair at a medieval jousting tournament; and the bronze hair along the back of his neck and shoulders began to bristle. Then his head swung to the right and both ears were turned in that direction. He held his breath as he listened. From the distance came a short, sharp reply. The hair on his back rose higher and his eyes flashed. He grunted again—*lc der* this time—and moving all four feet impatiently, he gave an impulsive flick of his antlers. He knew from the tone of the distant voice that his challenge had been accepted. The voice was that of a stranger, probably from the big valley far down where the Quehatch joins the main river. It was deep and mature; and it left no doubt that the intruder was on his way for a fatal meeting.

Every creature in the Quehatch was alert.

For a distance of at least three miles up and down the valley everyone had heard the challenge and its acceptance. They knew that before the night was over these two would meet. They all knew the great bull and he was respected as a friendly good neighbour. Everyone would be fully aware of the progress of events toward a climax ; and at the end some of them would be close enough to contribute to the defeat, with a total disregard as to who the victor might be. In the meantime, each had his own important problems. For it was that time of each day when those who have been inactive through the hours of sunshine come out to pursue their conquests through the night. From now until sunrise, they were all hunters or hunted, almost without exception. Those who had fed peacefully through the daytime, would become prey in the night. The weak, the slow and the careless, would become the food of survival for the stronger, swifter and wiser of their enemies. There would be no quarter or compromise ; and each individual was entirely master of his own destiny.

Out over the treetops a big snowy owl swung slowly back and forth like a grey ghost in flight. From somewhere down in the tall spruce along the stream a little pine squirrel chattered his evening call, ending it with a saucy chirp. The

big owl swerved and made a gliding dive in the direction of the squirrel—hovering over the spot for a few moments, to make sure further pursuit was futile—then glided on to land near some open ground. Less vigilant field mice, or perhaps a rabbit hurrying home to its favourite thicket, would be much easier to catch. He knew exactly the little trails to be watched, at all the good hunting places across the valley. It would be only a matter of time until some small creature would be sacrificed to the necessity of the moment.

Up on the mountainside a band of a dozen or more ewe mountain sheep with almost as many lambs made their way in single file up across the snowline toward some steep rocky cliffs. A bony old nanny, whose white coat was rusty from age and whose yellow horns were almost black, led the procession. The autumn night would be dark and their eyesight, marvellous in daytime, would soon be inferior to that of the wolf, grizzly, lynx or wolverine, who might aspire to a hearty meal of baby mutton. Having grazed peacefully all day on the lower grassy ridges, the wise old leader was now taking them on to the steep cliffs, where the lambs would be reasonably safe. Even so, she would guard the approach and keep an all-night vigil.

Somewhat farther down, where one of the big canyons cuts deep into the mountainside, extending far up to become lost in the permanent snowfields of one of the highest peaks, a large grizzly stood looking over the valley. He was a mountain grizzly, not as large as his close relative the giant Alaska Brown Bear ; but his nine hundred pounds were a mass of strength and energy gained from untold generations of ancestors who had climbed about these same mountains. His humped back was a dark grizzled colour, although the long hair on his sides was light brown. His sturdy short legs were almost black and he had unusually long claws. He stood rather arrogantly, with the stubby snout of his broad head thrust out. His intelligent nose twitched as he searched the air for information as to what was going on in the valley below.

His attention was particularly centred upon the challenges being hurled back and forth by the two bull moose. He knew that a real fight between them might solve his personal problems of the next several days. One solid blow by his powerful right arm would put down the largest moose ; but they were normally a little too fast of foot for him—except after a severe fight. When handicapped by injury they lay down to rest. Weary muscles became quickly



stiff and difficult to move swiftly. It was a long way down the valley to where the grizzly could find any salmon remaining in the stream. Salmon were not so good as they had been earlier in the season. Digging out ground squirrels or marmots was a lot of hard work for such small reward. He was fat, and a little lazy, anyhow ; and had been thinking seriously of going up to the winter den in the big canyon. His head settled down, almost sleepily, as he debated what course to follow. Another challenging grunt by the bull on the bench below caused his head to come up and he began sniffing the air again.

Among the others who came out to play their part in the drama of the valley, was a robust creature whose appearance was that of a dwarf bear of somewhat misshapen form. He came slowly out from under the tangled dead bones of a once stately spruce tree that had grown up close beside the rock wall of a small canyon. It was dark and gloomy underneath, and farther back in a cave-like recess was the animal's den. It was dank and mossy all around. The heavy growth of big trees had kept out all sunlight for probably hundreds of years.

The wolverine did not stop at the entrance to his shadowy den but walked methodically along a well-beaten trail between the big

tree-trunks and the wall of the canyon until he came to where the rock ended abruptly. Turning here, he climbed through the thicket on a steep bank until he came to the top of a ridge. Here he stopped, sniffing the fresh air, wrinkling his black nose. There were still many leaves on the alders. The afterglow of the sunset, reflected downward from the cloudless sky, was pale and soft, but he squinted his round broad-set eyes. He did not like sunlight, even in its most subtle form. He bared his yellow teeth in a snarl. It was a surly snarl, in which the upper lip quivered impulsively, giving further testimony to the defiance and disdain in his feelings—although there was no living thing within his sight which might have prompted such a show.

He was not a large animal—hardly four feet in length and barely forty pounds in weight—although unusually big for his kind. But he was short-legged, stocky and very sturdy. Long coarse hair, deep brown in colour, covered his body and hung down at the sides. Two broad, pale yellowish bands ran from the back of his stubby head, along either side to the broad drooping tail. There were large curved claws on his bear-like feet. The ears were small and the top of his head was grizzled like that of an old man's. It was plainly evident he depended

on strength rather than agility in his course of existence.

There was a cold glint in his eyes. He looked the part he played and the character for which a thousand generations of his ancestors had been feared and despised by all who knew them. His epithet had been universal among Indians, Eskimos and white trappers: a reprehensible creature of insatiate greed and unscrupulous tactics; a thief of uncanny cunning; and a defiler and destroyer of everything he was able to get his claws upon. Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist, had given his clan the Latin name *Gulo* (glutton); and to less scientific but practical acquaintances he had since been known as the skunk bear, wolf bear, beaver eater, little devil or carcajou. To many trappers he has been "the hairy pirate of the North."

The wolverine had heard the distant grunts of the bull moose. He listened attentively and raised his head a little higher. His sides heaved as he sniffed. He knew what might happen. The possibilities flashed through his thoughts. He had always prospered by the hard work of others and was continually alert to take advantage of such situations. There were easier ways than attempting to pull down even a badly wounded bull moose. He would let a grizzly

or the small pack of wolves who roamed the valley do that. If the wolves got there first, it would be much easier. He could chase them away. If it was the big grizzly who lived in the long canyon, the problem would be somewhat more difficult. But sooner or later he would get to the meat ; and once that was accomplished he would defile it so that no other creature would want it. Then he could feast to his heart's content. In either event, he had the patience, the ingenuity and the boldness to accomplish his desire.

He had started leisurely down to the floor of the valley when he stopped quite suddenly and stood still, listening. From down across the tops of the spruce, pine and birch trees came the clear staccato sound of a wood-chopper's axe. It had been a long time since he had heard that sound, but he recognized it immediately. He bared his yellow teeth in another snarl as he listened ; he knew that it came from down near the cabin beside the stream. Another trapper come in to intrude upon his private domain ! That would make life much easier when the snows came—getting fat just by following the trap line. But he had never had a great deal of difficulty in getting along in his own way, and he deeply resented this new intrusion into his valley. He snarled again,

this time aloud, as the chopping continued, and changing his course he moved a little more briskly, straight in the direction of the sound.

## CHAPTER III

### CONQUEST IN THE NIGHT

THE white chips flew as the axe bit solidly into the dead birch. The blade was new and sharp, gleaming as it swung through the air. The first blow resounded across the quiet valley like a pistol shot. It rather startled Jack, and he caught himself shrinking from making the next blow. Maybe it was because he had been listening with such interested attention to the two bulls. He had wondered if the one up on the bench was the big fellow he had seen on the way in . . . the one he had called Henry. He fancied the other bull was coming closer. They were challenging each other with unmistakable defiance. In the many times Jack had been in moose country during the calling season, he had on several occasions heard the clatter of their antlers, but this had always been in the stillness of the night and he had never seen a battle between two big bulls. He had listened to the stories of others who had. "Why those crazy big critters were goin' at it so hard they didn't pay no attention to me at all . . ." he recalled one of the back-country men telling him.

“ They just kept right on swingin’ at each other while I walked around like a referee at a prize fight.” This man had watched for some time and then shot the youngest of the contestants . . . “ before the meat got all het up.” Jack had not liked that part of the story.

He knew the bulls would hear his chopping ; that it would announce to every other animal, for a long distance around, that he was there. Probably even the sheep up on the mountain would hear the sound. They would also smell the smoke of his fire. He was tempted to stop. There was a strong urge to drop the axe and slip out through the deepening shadows of evening on the chance of seeing the battle. The rifle could be taken along, just in case. The thought flashed by that Henry might get hurt. He wouldn’t want that. He wanted to get better acquainted with the old boy. The sound of the axe and the smell of smoke might drive him out of the valley. Any bull as big as he was, with such a magnificent spread of antlers, had to be mighty smart. “ If there was just some way I could let Henry know I want to be friends with him. Gosh . . . I’d even help him fight that fellow coming up the valley.” But somehow he kept on chopping. “ Shucks . . . I’ll never get settled if I let a little thing like scaring a moose interfere with chopping

some wood. He'd be too tough for eating, anyhow."

The tree came down with a rattling clatter of dead branches and a thudding splatter on the dry leaves ; and he started trimming the white trunk. The snowy owl swung in from over the stream, obviously to look him over. His eyes followed the bird. There was something fascinating about the soft sound of its broad wings in the air. Jack smiled as the grey ghost turned a round head to stare down. The owl snapped his beak derisively as he passed over, gliding through the tree-tops. Jack returned to his work. The birch was soon cut into stove-lengths, and enough split for supper and breakfast.

It was dark inside the cabin, but he dug out the candles and lit one. By the time the fire was burning his eyes had become accustomed to the pale light and with the pleasant smell of birch smoke cutting the musty odours of the half-underground abode, he stood looking over his new quarters. He had been too tired, before, to take much notice. But now he saw the grey cobwebs which almost covered the one small window ; and the greasy stains around the candle he had stuck to the home-made table. " I'll make a broom of spruce boughs . . ." he thought, as his gaze moved over the



hard-packed dirt floor. "But I should cut some for the bunk, first." The place seemed awfully crowded with the stuff they had brought in. He could not help but think of the contrast to his room in the big house at home—not that a place of this sort was any new experience.. He liked the possessive independence which he found in its rough and sturdy primitiveness, but being alone here for a whole winter could be a very long time.

He picked up a sack containing the cooking utensils, and carefully dumped the contents on to the dirt floor. They had to be washed, anyhow. Picking out the coffee-pot and water-pail, he went outside.

Before he reached the creek, a grunt from the bull moose made him stop and listen. The old fellow had apparently moved down off the bench. Then Jack heard a reply. "Yes, there's the other one, throwing it right back at him." Still listening, he let his gaze wander about. Nearly all colour had faded from the sky. A lot more stars sparkled and the brighter ones seemed larger . . . almost close enough to reach up and grab in one's fingers. The darkness had settled rapidly; the silence seemed heavier; and the chill night air cut sharply through his clothes to tingle against his warm body.

"Dad's probably eating supper . . ." he said to himself. "Wonder what he's having? Saturday night. Probably steak . . . and apple pie. Maybe he's eating downtown. This is the week his poker club meets at our house. Wonder if he'll miss the cribbage games we played on Sundays . . . ?"

The abrupt chatter of a pine squirrel somewhere at the back of the cabin attracted his attention. It was the alarm call and Jack turned to listen, while his eyes tried to pierce the shadows that had dropped like a heavy curtain among the thick stand of trees. He picked up the sound of something walking on dry leaves. Now it stopped . . . or maybe it had come to a bare place. He held his breath and strained to catch the slightest sound. Whatever it was, it must have stopped; for the silence became entirely too long. It could hardly be a bear, although it walked like one. A bear would not have come so close, except in the pitch blackness of night; and hardly then, because of the smell of fresh smoke. It was certainly a bold creature . . . possibly a wolf . . . more likely a wolverine. "He's probably standing back there, staring at me, right now. Wonder what he's thinking about . . . probably doesn't like my cluttering up his valley with smoke, and chopping down his trees. If there was snow on the ground I'd

go out and see what it is . . . but then I wouldn't have heard it walking on the dry leaves." He stood thoughtfully. "Wish I had as good eyes as animals have. . . ."

There was not very much the Indians knew about the animals of the Alaska wilderness that Jack Lauson did not know. He had been born with a natural interest in the creatures of his native land. Even before he was old enough to use a gun, he had made some fairly long trips over the trails into the back country, both in summer and winter. His father had often taken him along on hunting trips and business visits to placer mining camps. Even more often he had gone out with some of the best Indian hunters. His father had seen to that . . . considering it as important a part of his growing up as anything learned in schoolrooms. The Indians liked Alec Lauson and they liked his sturdy, good-looking son. The fact that the lad was so deeply interested in the things so much a part of their own lives, gave them a particular attachment to him. They had told Jack a great deal about the animals in the vast wilderness around them.

He had become fully aware of the circumstances in which the creatures of the wild enjoyed superiority over their human relatives. This had been carefully explained by his mother's

brother, the present chief of the Tenan Kutchin. "Animals him see better, smell better, hear better . . . know better 'bout beeg meaning of little things . . . know better 'bout things not yet happened . . . know better 'bout weather and many things." Then tapping the side of his own head the old chief had solemnly added, "Only up here Indian smarter." Jack had never forgotten what Tinneh had told him ; and experience had taught him its truth.

Now, once again, he tried to understand more clearly just why it was that his own eyes were incapable of piercing the darkness sufficiently even to identify the four-footed creature, which he knew was watching him. He had asked other Indians to explain this. "They open their eyes wider . . ." but the rest they took for granted. He had watched the eyes of the family cat, as the pupil was made larger and smaller, as the diaphragm of his camera was adjusted to admit light through the lens. He knew the principle was the same ; and that in his own eyes there was no such physical control. There was of course more to this than he knew, for inside the eye of most animals there is also a little screen, like a venetian blind, which can be opened or closed to regulate carefully the amount of light admitted. Thus with everything wide open, the animals are capable of get-

ting a clear picture in darkness while human beings are almost helpless.

Finally brought back to his washing, Jack filled both the utensils with the clear cold water and returned to the cabin. He went around to the side and listened for a few minutes ; then went inside, pushing the door tightly closed behind him.

The big wolverine had watched intently all that Jack did. It was not all boldness which brought him so close. Thoroughly familiar with the cabin, outside and in, he felt very confident in the deep shadows. He had stopped when Jack appeared, only wrinkling his nose occasionally in a silent snarl as he spied on every move, until the cabin door closed behind the boy. Then the wolverine moved even closer. Strange scents intrigued him, as they were separated from old familiar ones. The smell of man was not new to him. It was intimately associated with the steel traps that caught so many of the smaller animals who were not as smart as himself. This creature also killed moose, bear and mountain sheep. It was deeply feared by every other animal. Its presence in the valley could be very profitable to him . . . but dangerous. There was much the Pirate did not understand. This annoyed him and he repeatedly bared his yellow

fangs as he moved cautiously about, sniffing and peering through the shadows and the trees. At the same time he tried to figure out the strange scents. Some were appetizing ; and he determined to find out more about them. Some time, when the cabin's occupant was a safe distance away, he would get inside. What he could not hurriedly eat, he would tear to pieces and otherwise make useless to the owner. With this pleasant thought he finally moved on down the valley.

The Pirate ambled along leisurely, still thinking about the latest intruder who had come to live in the cabin beside the stream, and the challenging experiences which it promised, but his senses were now acutely alive for the more imminent prospects of the night. He did not like the long periods of silence between the two bull moose ; and when they did call, back and forth, there was not the note of urgent determination which he liked to hear. The wolverine was becoming increasingly impatient for something else to happen. The big snowy owl swung over the tree-tops, diving down to snap its bill disdainfully in a mock dive only a few feet over the wolverine. Glancing upward, he wrinkled his nose, but kept steadily on his way. This old bird had been around for a long time and the Pirate knew him well. They shared, quite

involuntarily, the same part of the Quehatch and there was hardly a night that their hunting trails did not cross. It was always with the same sort of greeting. Most of the other creatures just shunned the wolverine ; but the big white owl always showed his dislike in a more expressive manner. The feeling was mutual. The Pirate had once found a snowy owl in a steel trap. That was when he was quite young and inexperienced. He had walked in without the slightest precaution. With only one foot in the trap, the owl had clamped the free set of claws into his shoulder with painful violence and its beak cut a gash in the side of his head. It was one of the most severe lessons he ever learned ; and after all the unpleasant trouble, the bird was so tough he couldn't eat it. He had never forgotten that incident. The owl came back and dived at him again, but this time it was entirely ignored.

Pound for pound, the Pirate was by far the strongest and most pugnacious of all the animals in his little world. He had killed a grizzly bear. It had been only a two-year-old, to be sure, and attacked while asleep in its winter den ; but it was a grizzly nevertheless who had awakened to put up a furious fight. That was during the worst winter he had experienced and the only one when he had become desperate for

food. He had won that fight ; but he would not relish trying it again. In his twelve years of growing stronger, fatter and wiser, he had battled almost every kind of animal and bird that inhabited this valley ; but he had found it was much more convenient to let others do the hard work and then steal it away from them.

He had his own part of the Quehatch and had regular routes which he followed. Sometimes he went one way and at other times another. If he was particularly fortunate and got more than it was possible to eat, he would cache the surplus for another time. He never passed up an opportunity . . . even if the food was sure to spoil. It was not often that he had to go into the territory of other wolverines, even in winter. Not that he respected the territorial rights of his own family living nearby ; but it was seldom necessary, and he was generally back in the darkness of the home den before the light of another day became too bright, even in summer when there was hardly any darkness at all.

He had gone probably half a mile and by this time was following the well-beaten game trail along the stream, when he stopped and his stubby head came up as far as the short neck would permit. From back toward the moun-



tain came the sound of flapping wings. It was not a bird in flight, but the frantic beating of panic and struggle. This was music to the Pirate's ears. Almost immediately he started toward the sound, increasing his pace a little. He was seldom in a hurry, for his methods did not require any such exertion. Avoiding the thickets and picking the easiest places to walk, he moved quietly along.

An excellent judge of direction and distance, he did not bother to use his nose for further information. He already knew all that was necessary and the procedure would be routine. As he approached the prospective scene, however, he became more alert and cautious. Passing underneath a big spruce with limbs drooping to the ground, he stopped at the far edge to peer out beyond. About twenty yards ahead he saw a marten carrying the limp form of a black partridge toward another big tree. The bird, with wings and feathers all fluffed out, appeared almost as large as the luxuriantly furred little animal. The marten had to walk very erectly, with head held high, to carry the grouse. With one glance the situation became quite clear. The marten was aware that his evening meal was in danger of being interrupted and was making a hasty attempt to reach the relative safety of the tree-top. Climbing up

with the heavy burden would not be easy. The wolverine was capable of following, although climbing was such unnecessary effort. With a spitting growl he plunged through the screen of boughs, making as loud and fearful a noise as he could.

It had not been easy to get the grouse and the marten had spent a long time in the process. The grouse well deserve their nickname "fool hens," but they are always capable of getting into flight in a flashing instant. Even when feeding on the ground, they are difficult prey. The marten had lain very quietly on a large limb, peering patiently down through the tangle of branches. He had climbed down very cautiously and slipped silently to where he could continue to watch as the bird walked about in a small thicket of rose bushes, making a leisurely meal of the bright red seed pods. Anticipating the grouse's movements, he had changed his ambush a couple of times; only to have the bird move in a different direction. Finally, crouched under a spruce bough near one end of the clump of rose bushes, the grouse had walked close enough. Like a flash the marten had darted out and a swift leap into the air had caught the bird as it was taking to flight. Quite a struggle had ensued, with the strong wings pounding furiously. The sharp briars cut

into his skin as they thrashed about and the bird pecked desperately at his eyes. But he had proudly carried the prize out into the open. This success would relieve him of further conquests for the night. He was very pleased and settled down to enjoy the requirements of survival. But then he caught the warning of approaching danger. Picking up the grouse he had started for the big spruce.

Sound and fury were the Pirate's principal stock in trade . . . the logic of which had been proved time after time. Even on the most defenceless he always charged with the same mad rush of sound and fury. It was a profitable expedient. The marten tried to leap on to the spruce branch ; but the bird's wings got under his feet and the burden was too bulky. The wolverine was upon him before he hardly got off the ground. A sharp slash of yellow teeth cut the silky furred skin like a knife and a heavily clawed paw was slapped solidly upon the feathered prize. The marten quickly regained his footing and managed to scramble up another bough toward a high retreat, where he could nurse his wound. The Pirate methodically carried the grouse into the open where he squatted down to enjoy a leisurely supper. But his night was only beginning.

## CHAPTER IV

### SURVIVAL OF THE STRONGEST

HENRY walked with stately stride through the scattering of tall spruce that rose over the valley floor. He was not graceful, either in appearance or movement ; but the easy spring with which he stepped along so smoothly with long steps, and carried the great spread of antlers, gave him a rugged sort of dignity. Occasionally he stopped motionless, in the gathering darkness. His head swung around until his nose pointed up the valley. The faint scent of fresh smoke cut sharply into his nostrils. After sampling it for a moment he blew out the smell with a snort. Then he sucked it in again, to reassure himself. It was more disconcerting than the sound of chopping had been. He put the two together ; and although he had not learned from personal experience that these unfamiliar intrusions into his valley represented danger, instinct warned him they should be considered as such.

Moving slowly on to a dead tree, he raked his antlers solidly back and forth against the dead branches, pawed the earth and snorted. There

was no velvet left on any part of the horns to be raked off. Every prong was clean as a bear's tooth. He was just testing his strength. Backing away a couple of steps, he moved forward again, pushing into the tangle of limbs until they snapped in his face. Then he raked upward until the whole tree was lifted off the ground. Pulling back again, he bellowed deep and loud.

As he stood quietly waiting for a reply from down the valley, one ear switched around and he turned his head to look back. In a few moments a rabbit went hopping hastily across an open space to disappear behind other trees. Henry moved his whole body around as he continued to watch ; and shortly a long-legged lynx appeared, moving like an animated shadow along the same course the rabbit had followed. The bull's hoofs dug into the sod and his antlers came down as he charged toward the lynx. A little surprised at the unexpected action, the big grey cat made a spurt, without changing its course.

Again Henry stood stiffly, listening, with his ears shifting in one direction and then another. For the first time there had been no reply to his challenge. This annoyed him. He was on the verge of going down to find the other bull when the long-drawn-out quavering call of the

cow came drifting across the valley. His head swung quickly, and after a few moments' hesitation, he started in that direction.

Several canyons cut back into the mountain wall that rose along both sides of the Quehatch. In the spring and early part of the summer, streams ran out of these, carrying the melted snow down from the high ramparts, plunging in lacy falls, and rolling through the shadows of big spruce. Through the latter part of the open season most of these feeders were dry . . . except one. On the opposite side from the cabin and about a mile below, there was a larger break in the mountain wall, which was called the valley of the Little Quehatch. It swung back to the south and to the east for more than two miles before it closed in and climbed abruptly to the snowfields. Numerous big springs, which flowed the year round, and a large area of snow and ice supplied a good flow of water, even when all the rest of the feeders were dry.

At the entrance of the Little Quehatch, between high rocky cliffs that rose abruptly on both sides, spread a pretty little lake almost clear across the valley. Around the edge and extending a couple of hundred yards above and below the lake was a considerable area of thickly grown willows, backed by a heavy stand of

birches. This provided a fine feeding ground for a colony of beavers, who for many generations had carefully and skilfully kept their big artificial dam in proper condition to retain and control the constant flow of water in their lake. It was not very deep—nowhere more than six or eight feet—but the water was crystal clear and its smooth surface reflected the scenic beauties of its rugged surroundings.

Little Quehatch Lake was the summer home of a considerable number of birds, from mallard and merganser ducks to magpies and pretty little warblers. The willow thickets provided the favourite winter yarding-ground for the moose of the big valley. There were always lots of snowshoe rabbits, who found the thickets a fine retreat from the lynx and foxes who came there every night to hunt, and the pair of big grey wolves who for many years had raised their families in a rocky den up near the head of the little valley.

The vicinity of the lake was also considered the private domain of a particular cow moose. The Old Lady of Little Quehatch Lake, she might well have been called—and throughout the pleasant summer weeks the other moose knew better than to trespass, especially when she had a young one or two. Even in winter, when the snow was deep and the other moose

gathered there to feed on the willows, and the bulls had lost their antlers, she bossed the herd like a dowager despot.

The Old Lady and her gangling youngster were feeding along the margin of the birches just below the dam, when Henry came striding into view. His head was held a bit higher than usual and there was an extra snap to his stride. The young one hurried to his mother's side. She laid back her big ears and the hair went up on her shoulders. Henry was accustomed to this sort of reception when he came home in the autumn and he just stood gazing with erect dignity. His eyes particularly followed the young one, who excitedly stared back at the big bull. It was no surprise to see the youngster, for he had caught glimpses of him during the summer while wandering about by himself ; but this was the first close view he had had.

Among all the families of wild creatures who lived in the Alaskan wilderness, there was no youngster with less of a claim to beauty or grace. Barely four months old, he was fully five feet high at his hunchback shoulders and weighed over five hundred pounds. His big-boned legs were much too long for a body that appeared to have developed in the wrong proportions. His head seemed unnecessarily long, with ears like canoe paddles ; and the neck was



so short that he had to kneel, or spread his feet far apart to reach the ground with his nose. His hair was woolly, of a dirty light beige colour, and from ears to heels gave the appearance of being badly in need of a good brushing. His movements were as ungraceful as his appearance. But the Old Lady's hair bristled up stiffer and her ears laid back tighter as he nuzzled against her. He was every inch and every ounce his mother's baby and she would not hesitate to protect him with her life.

They all stood staring at each other for some time. Then the hair on the cow's back settled down and her ears came up, and she returned to nibbling at the willows. Henry also relaxed and in a little while he too began feeding on the tender twigs. As fast as the Old Lady snipped off the best tips of a cluster of willow branches, she would move on to another. Sometimes she reared up on to her hind legs to reach attractive clumps, or rode down tall young trees by walking over them, thus bringing the tender parts more easily within reach.

It was quite dark now. Most of the animals in the valley had settled down for a short rest, to wait for the moon to come up. Then the hunters would resume their conquests. But the Old Lady kept right on feeding—busy as an Indian woman picking berries. There was good

reason for this. She was apprehensive about the bright moonlight that was soon to flood the valley. It was sure to bring the family of wolves down out of the Little Quehatch. The three young whelps were now almost the size of their big black father, who was giving them the final instructions in how to carry out the best traditions of their race. With the five of them running together as a pack, spurred by the aggressive impulses of a frosty full moon and the approach of winter, they might easily present a serious situation which would leave no time for feeding.

The three moose worked their way leisurely out across the mouth of the Little Quehatch, keeping just below the beaver dam, where the furry little engineers were all very busy getting their project in good shape for winter. The Old Lady and her young one paid no attention to the beavers, although Henry occasionally stopped to watch as one of the chunky brown workmen waddled along the top of the dam, carefully looking for a spot that needed attention. The big bull stared inquisitively as one of them laboriously dragged a freshly cut log close by, puffing and grunting, until it was pulled up to the base of the dam ; and then the beaver began struggling to implant the log cleverly into the foundation. Still others were floating

material down from above, or packing clay and dried grass in among the logs and branches. They all had a single purpose—to make their dam solid enough to withstand the ice and high water which would come with the break-up in the spring. Even the young ones were doing their part, helping their elders cut down the trees, trimming off the branches, or aiding in transporting the building material.

At the head of the big valley, where the glacier wound and twisted down from the white peaks, the indigo of the night sky was paling to a delicate blue. Already there was a silver fringe along the silhouette of the mountains. Rapidly the area became brighter and then the sharp rim of the moon began rising into view.

Out on the little lake a big old beaver who had a log in tow, slapped his broad tail on the water with a sharp crack that sounded almost like a rifle shot ; and every workman who was on the shore instantly stopped what he was doing to go running as fast as he could to the safety of the water. Somewhere along the shore there was a prowler. It may have been the wolves, or perhaps a wolverine, or a lynx. None questioned the warning. One big fat beaver went plopping grotesquely almost under Henry's nose, in such a hurry that he puffed

and grunted, bumping against the willows as he scurried around them, and finally scrambled up the dam to tumble into the water with an ungraceful splash. Henry wiggled his big ears and snorted, as though he would like to chase the unseen intruder away ; and the Old Lady's young one, who recognized the warning as clearly as any of the beavers did, moved closer to his mother and stared about.

The moonlight sent all the night hunters on their way again. The aristocratic little marten slipped into the tree-tops in quest of sleepy feathered quarry ; the sleek weasel, already white as the snow to come, began prowling the tiny trails through the dead grass. The lynx, the foxes and all the wolverines were on their way, covering familiar routes. Big Blackie was leading his family of wolves down the Little Quehatch at a brisk trot.

The three moose moved back the way they had come, until they were once again at the edge of the willow thickets. The Old Lady led the way, until they were on the open ground among the spruce. Here she would have a much better chance of protecting the young one, if Blackie's pack of grey wolves should decide this was their night for tender moose.

Henry stood to one side and a bit higher up on a gentle slope where the trees swung round

him in a black wall. His head was turned and he was gazing up the valley where the moon was beginning its slow course across the sky. He was methodically chewing his cud. He had not stood there very long, however, when he suddenly stiffened, swallowed his cud and swung round to grunt loudly and defiantly. The other bull had been almost forgotten. But now he was so close at hand it was startling. The Intruder had come silently up the valley until he was less than half a mile away.

The hair on Henry's whole back was bristling like a porcupine's as he quickly started to meet the challenger. The Old Lady stood stiffly, with her ears up. Big-and-Awkward took several steps as if to go along with the bull, and he snorted rather bravely. They both watched intently as Henry strode away through the moonlight and disappeared into the black wall of the trees.

The Intruder had found the Quehatch Valley very much to his liking as he marched steadily along the game trail that followed the stream. He noticed food was unusually abundant and there were plenty of open spaces to wander about in the early summer when one's antlers were growing and were soft and tender. There were also fine places to yard-up in the winter. He liked it much better than the big wide

valley which it joined about ten miles below. The fact there had been but one answer to his challenge encouraged him. It was a big strong voice, but he was determined to take over this little domain. He knew there were other moose in the valley, for he had noticed their tracks and where they had been feeding along the trail. If there were other grown bulls they were surely too young or not brave enough to defy a deep-throated challenge such as his. Now that the moon was up and the moment of conquest was drawing near he snorted defiantly as he quickened his stride, confident that he had the strength and aggressiveness to make this beautiful valley his own.

Henry moved along with a snappy stride, occasionally dipping his antlers in a sort of shadow-boxing gesture. Now and then he stopped just long enough to paw the earth and to flex his knees ; and he grunted once, to let the Intruder know he was on his way. When he came to an open space among the spruce, where there was very little brush or tall grass, he stopped in the shadow of the trees. The moonlight shone down upon the open ground and gleamed on the trees that rose like a high wall around the opposite side. It was a good place to settle this important matter as to who should rule the Quehatch.

It was not long before the Intruder walked slowly out of the blackness and stopped in the edge of the moonlight. He seemed to sense that this was the place. He was a mighty bull—with big and powerful shoulders and strong legs. His antlers were not quite so large or nearly so heavy as Henry's, which would give him an advantage in a long struggle ; and their points were unusually sharp. He carried himself with swaggering confidence.

Henry eyed him critically, as he snorted and walked out into the open.

There had been none of the usual preliminaries of hooking antlers into dead trees, pawing up the earth and repeated grunts, before the bulls faced each other, or walked away a few times before locking horns. There was no sham or idle boasting between these two. They were deadly serious in this matter of pride and honour.

Henry walked slowly until he was almost to the centre and then stopped. The Intruder moved forward, grunting. But he did not stop. His steps quickened and his sharp pointed antlers slowly came down until he had to squint his flashing eyes upward as he came charging savagely. The hard ground fairly trembled under his thundering attack. Henry dropped his own antlers, and his hoofs dug into the earth

as he strained every muscle to meet the charge with equal force. They came together with a clatter of horns that resounded through the quiet valley and sent smoky wisps of dust floating upward to sparkle in the moonlight. The impact of this first charge set both of the mighty creatures shuddering on their solid feet. Both dug their hoofs into the ground and began struggling forward, wrestling their ponderous antlers from side to side with all the strength they possessed.

This was no new experience for either of the bulls; although neither had faced quite as bitter a beginning struggle. Other bulls had come up the Quehatch to challenge the rule of Henry's domain; and he had always sent them meekly defeated back to the big valley, or so severely exhausted and injured that they lay down and fell prey to grizzly or wolves.

Henry steadily forced the Intruder backward; but the other's antlers being shorter, slipped inside to dig their sharp points across Henry's face and into his neck. In spite of this he continued to lunge forward, until the Intruder gave ground and with a sudden lurch pulled away. But before Henry could set himself the other bull charged back again, this time with such force that the protective front prong



on one of Henry's antlers was broken off at the base. Thus given a greater advantage, the smaller horns came through to slash into his adversary's neck. This time it was Henry who pulled back ; but it was he who returned to the charge, swinging his great antlers and digging up the earth as they wrestled with powerful fury.

For a long way up and down the Quehatch every animal was fully aware of the struggle in progress. The martens in the tree-tops stood up intently, their little sharp ears cocked in the direction of the fight. The little weasels stood up on their haunches, stretching their slender bodies, and their beady black eyes sparkled as they listened. The beavers stopped their work and twitched their whiskers, and the wolves and wolverines started moving briskly in the direction of the sound. The big grizzly came lumbering down off the mountainside ; and even the mountain sheep stood up and peered down through the moonlight from their snowy cliffs. But the two who listened with the greatest attention were the Old Lady and her young one, Big-and-Awkward. They all knew, from the fury of the sounds, that this was a battle to the finish.

The two bulls charged and wrestled with locked antlers, almost without a pause. They

surged back and forth until the ground was torn up over a large area and they both were so wet from the exertion that their black bodies glistened in the moonlight. This was no sparing match. It was a struggle for survival as well as supremacy. It was a test of individual strength and stamina, dictated by the instincts of hundreds of generations of their kind. No quarter was given or expected. Victory and complete defeat alone was the inescapable purpose of both. All else in their little world was forgotten. Even when Blackie and his tribe trotted out into the open and the wolves circled close, to sniff with ambitious anticipation, neither of the bulls even realized they were there.

After an hour or more of the intensive struggle, both bulls began to show weary unsteadiness. When they charged head-on, their knees sagged and they were both puffing hard. The Intruder had pressed his advantages, repeatedly getting the sharp points of his antlers inside to jab and cut. The weight of Henry's heavier antlers had become about all his neck could bear; and his legs were losing their strength. But his heart was strong and he kept charging forward.

As the struggle moved slowly to climax, other animals came to peer out of the black shadows

of the trees. Intently they stared, and occasionally moved silently to keep out of each other's way. Some stayed only a little while and then returned to their own conquests of the night ; but there were others who would stay close until fate dropped the final curtain on this tragic drama in the wilderness.

The moon had climbed well up into the night sky when the struggle came to an end. Both bulls were on the verge of complete exhaustion. It had been long and bitter, and both had suffered more than ordinary wounds. It seemed only a matter of minutes before one or the other would collapse. Then Henry stopped pushing forward. He stood with feet planted far apart and braced himself, as best he could, to receive the continued charges of his adversary ; and he did not attempt to wrestle with his antlers, as he had before. Sensing victory the Intruder intensified the fury of his attacks. The wolves got up from where they had been lying, watching and waiting, in the shadow of the spruce, and Blackie led them out into the moonlight closer to the scene. The wolverine also came out to snarl at Blackie and his tribe. Even the snowy owl soared over and came down close to get a better view.

The Intruder pulled back, his sides heaving heavily, and his mouth half open in an effort

to breathe. It was then that Henry dug his hoofs into the torn up ground and lunged forward, putting all his remaining energy into one final charge. There was another resounding clatter of horns. The force of the attack put the Intruder back on his haunches and a powerful wrestling twist sent him sprawling on his side. Henry pulled back and watched his adversary struggle desperately to regain his feet. He floundered about, but finally got up. They met head on again. This time Henry fairly lifted him off the ground with a surge forward and the Intruder's legs collapsed beneath him as he went down again. He tried to get up, but this time he did not have the strength to do so. Slowly Henry backed away ; and he stood up straight, with his head held high.

Finally the Intruder got to his feet. Henry took a couple of steps in his direction, grunting a low challenge as he walked. But the Intruder's head settled lower as he slowly turned away, in acknowledgement of defeat. Unsteadily he made his way, step by step, back the way he had come. As he disappeared into the shadows of the trees, Blackie and his pack followed ; and in the darkness beyond there were others who would also take up the trail of the exhausted vanquished.

Henry stood proudly, his sides still heaving,

until he was all alone in the moonlit opening among the spruce ; then he turned and strode slowly back to find the Old Lady and her big and awkward young one.

## CHAPTER V

### READING THE SIGNS

THE next morning Jack was washing his face in the icy stream long before the sun was over the white mountain rim up the valley. There was a heavy coating of frost on the dead grass and the crisp air was strong with the feel of snow. The sky was clear overhead, but far down to the west a solid blanket of grey clouds hung low over the earth.

On the mountainside at the back of the cabin he noticed several white objects on one of the grassy ridges, a short distance below the snow line. "There's my mountain mutton . . . and quite handy, too. I'll get the fire going and breakfast started, and take a look at those with the glasses."

Hurrying back inside, he soon had the stove humming its cheerful morning tune, and coffee and oatmeal were on their way. Digging the binoculars out of the duffle bag he slipped the carrying strap over his head and went outside again. "Ewes and lambs . . ." They showed up clearly through the powerful glasses. "That's fine. I'll have mountain mutton for supper."

Jack had planned on spending the first day

cleaning the cabin and getting settled as comfortably as possible. "But I can do that later," he argued. "Those sheep are mighty handy . . . I need meat . . . and it feels like snow. Climbing up there in deep snow won't be so easy. And I can get a good look at the whole valley from up there, too." He moved the glasses slowly, examining the best way to approach the sheep, and speculated on the best vantage points from which he might survey the valley. Then he let the glasses roam farther over the mountainside. He saw other sheep. A much larger band was located farther to the east; and four big rams were noticed moving down a snowy ridge higher up. "This valley is full of game." Enthusiastically he went back inside to hurry up the breakfast.

The first golden rays of sunshine were just shooting down into the valley to sparkle on the frost, as Jack started back through the trees. He carried his rifle in the crook of his arm. He took his time, keeping a sharp lookout for signs of game and likely places to set traps. It would not be easy, until the snow came, to learn where the various fur bearers had their regular routes of travel; but he instinctively picked out the most likely places. "This is awfully good-looking marten country . . . and there must be silver fox in here." There were

an unusual number of well-used rabbit runs. "That means lynx . . . as well as fox." Two or three times grouse burst out of nearby trees or flushed from under overhanging boughs with a startling flare of whirring wings. "Oh, this is a wonderful place!"

A slight breeze was blowing down the valley, and while Jack was pretty sure it was a local current of air, it had caused him to move at an angle toward the big canyon about a mile below. He was anxious to look over the big canyon, anyhow; and he was quite sure he could find a place where he could climb up and be in a good down-wind position to stalk the sheep.

By the time he got into the canyon he had almost forgotten about mountain mutton. There was a dry stream bed that ran out into the valley, which he had come to several hundred yards from the rocky portal. Like the main stream, it was mostly a jumble of rocks, although here and there was a bed of fine sand, edged with soft earth. Wherever any animal had crossed these places they left the clear imprint of their tracks. Jack examined these very carefully, sometimes getting down on his knees to clean out a track to get a better view. He was able to identify about everything from weasel to grizzly bear, and made mental notes of where well-used trails crossed the stream bed.



The canyon itself was an attractive place, with big spruce rising out of the open floor between high broken walls of grey rock. The stream bed narrowed here, and there were fewer places where tracks could be seen ; although it did not take long to see that a grizzly had made a number of trips up and down. " He's probably got his winter den somewhere up there . . . and I'll bet I could find it if I half tried." The thought was exciting " But I need meat. That comes first."

As he moved along the stream bed, examining tracks when he found them, he occasionally stopped to survey the possibilities of climbing up out of the canyon. Another thought also flashed into his mind. He dug the toe of his shoe-pac into a sandy place between the rocks. " Wonder if there's gold under there ? " Then moving on, still gazing down, he tried to brush the idea away. " But no water to wash it out . . . and in the spring, too much. And all those rocks to keep it safe."

It was not as easy to get out of the canyon as he had expected. But finally he started climbing. " I must be careful. I'm here all alone. An accident . . . but no . . . I'll be careful." The rock and the earth seemed solid ; and Jack was a good climber. Now he began thinking about sitting on a high lookout and surveying

the whole valley with his binoculars . . . and of having mountain mutton for supper. But instinct cautioned him . . . for it was many long miles of difficult mountain trail to the nearest place where there was another human. Even a sprained ankle could be disastrous. Once he hesitated to attempt an almost perpendicular climb. "It's silly . . ." he argued. "I've climbed much worse places . . ." and on he went. The top of the rocky canyon wall was reached and he went on towards the crest of the ridge, where he expected to get a good view of the sheep, as well as the whole valley.

Having already climbed to the edge of the timber, there was only a scattering of stunted trees and a few patches of brush that separated him from the bare grassy pastures above. But he had to climb over a heavy growth of juniper vines, which made difficult going. He moved up the ridge, so as to be nearer the sheep and high enough when he reached the crest to look out over the tree-tops. Finally he began crouching down and then went the last fifty feet crawling on hands and knees. Peering cautiously over the top, there they were—about a dozen ewes and lambs, grazing peacefully on the opposite ridge about two hundred yards away. Stretched out on the juniper, he lay the rifle

down and slowly moved the binoculars up to his eyes. The sheep were all fat and white as snow. The glasses were so powerful he could clearly see their yellow eyes and almost count the year-rings on their golden horns. Slowly he moved from one to another. He noticed the old nannie, who was undoubtedly the wise leader of the band, and he picked out a fine yearling ram, that would be perfect for meat. "Junior, you don't know it, but I have designs on you." Then he watched two of the lambs enjoying a high-spirited romp. A little off by themselves on a level spot, the youngsters were having a grand time, butting each other, jumping about stiff-legged, and chasing around in circles. "They're cute little rascals." He smiled as he watched them. "Not a care in the world."

Taking the binoculars down from his eyes, Jack surveyed a possible approach which would take him closer to the game. The yearling might be hit at this distance—but why risk a long shot. By circling back into the timber it would be easy to get into the intervening ravine and go above them on the same ridge, where broken outcroppings of rock would make it possible to get within about thirty yards. After all, there was no hurry; and most of the fun in hunting was stalking close to the game. He always remembered what the Indians taught:

“ Good hunter him closeum game . . . one shot plenty.”

Slipping back down the ridge a little way, Jack sat up and turned his attention out into the valley. The morning sun sparkled on the white line of jagged peaks that stretched along the opposite horizon, and it was pleasantly warm where he squatted on the soft bed of juniper. Pulling off his cap he lay back and relaxed, letting his gaze wander, completely enjoying being a part of it all.

It was farther to the glacier than he had thought ; and the heavily wooded character of the valley floor continued almost to the brown rock moraine at the foot of the ice. It was rugged country up there ; but the mountains were broken with occasional grassy pastures where there must be plenty of mountain sheep. His eyes swept down over the valley, stopping momentarily upon the cabin beside the stream bed, then moving on to the lake at the mouth of the Little Quehatch. “ That must be the beaver pond old Simeon told me about.” The binoculars were brought into use. “ Yes . . . quite a dam they have. I’ve got to look that place over . . . for sure.” Then the glasses picked up three moose in the willow thickets and held on to them. “ Well, well . . . that looks like Henry. Hi, Henry! You and I

have a date to get better acquainted, old boy. Nice family you have." Then he added, "Wonder what happened to the big guy who was calling you all those names last night?" The glasses moved down across the valley, searching back and forth for other signs of life.

Some distance below and close to the opposite mountains four more moose were located. "Two cows and two calves. Looks like one cow with two young ones, and a barren old lady. Maybe wolves got her baby." The glasses moved on. "I'll bet there are a dozen or more moose out there." Taking the binoculars down, his gaze wandered about in search of something else.

It was not long before he brought up the glasses quickly. Down the valley and not far beyond the opposite side of the rocky stream bed a large grey wolf was walking slowly across an opening in the trees. "Well, how-do-you-do!" A little surprised at seeing it out in the open at midday, he watched the animal critically. Then he saw another one standing back under the trees. "A black one! What a big fellow! Something's up." The glasses moved slowly about, searching for a clue. "What's that?" It was a dark object back in the trees. He could not see it clearly, but he watched it intently. "Certainly not a rock. Looks like

a big animal lying down." The glasses moved back to pick up the wolves. The grey one was moving back across the opening, and the black one had disappeared behind the trees. It certainly appeared as though the object under the trees was the centre of attention for the wolves. "A live animal would never let them get that close. It must be a kill. Maybe a moose. But what's keeping them away? I've got to look into that."

Lowering the glasses Jack carefully established the location. "That dead spruce will make it easy to find. I'll get that yearling ram and take it back to the cabin . . . then go down and find out what that's all about." Getting to his feet he went briskly down toward the timber line.

A large flock of ptarmigan flushed ahead and went cackling out over the tree-tops to swing in a wide circle and disappear behind the ridge. He stopped to watch the birds; realizing that their cackling alarm would put the sheep on the alert. "They will probably think it's only a fox. Or do they have a way of telling more than we think they do?"

It took fully an hour to make the detour and climb up the ravine, keeping well out of sight of the sheep. There was almost a dead calm to the atmosphere, on which human scent might

drift in any direction. But there was no alternative. He kept thinking about the wolves—particularly the big black one. “What a rug his hide would make for my room at home. I’d rather get him than anything else in this country. He’s probably a smart old devil . . . but I’ll have all winter to try.”

Climbing up out of the ravine, it was easy to move through the outcroppings of rock and get to a point where the sheep should be right below. The rifle was held in readiness for instant use. “I’ll just take Junior.” Walking slowly out into the open, with the gun clasped in both hands, his eyes swept rapidly over the ridge. The sheep had moved. “Maybe they’re down on the other side.” He walked a little more briskly to where the whole ridge was in view. His gaze made a wide sweep and he turned abruptly. There went the sheep, high up on the next ridge, strung out in single file behind the rangy old ewe, with the yearling close behind her. “So long, Junior. This was your lucky day . . . not mine.” They were well up in the snow and much too far away to risk a chance shot. The rifle slipped down until the butt rested on the ground. He took a deep breath, and smiled. “The old lady was too smart for me. No mountain mutton tonight.”

Turning his back on the sheep, he put the

binoculars on the spot where he had seen the wolves. "The black one is still there. He's moved to the other side of whatever is under the trees. It must be a kill . . . and something's keeping them away. About the only thing that could be, is a grizzly. A bear hide would make a good mattress under my sleeping-bag this winter." The black wolf disappeared ; and Jack turned his attention to a methodical survey of the valley, making mental notes which would guide him when he explored it on foot.

With another disappointed gaze at the sheep, now high on the snowy ridge, he started down the mountain. "Some nice thick sheep steaks, or a stew, would certainly taste mighty good. Gosh, what I could do right now to a big meal ! If this appetite keeps up, I won't have any grub left by Christmas . . . unless I do better than I've done this morning."

Missing the sheep began to worry him. He could not recall any other time when he had failed in an attempt to get mountain mutton. They were not difficult to stalk. "And the sheep away back here aren't nearly as wary as most places I've hunted them. Those should have been easy." Could there be some reason why he had failed ? He recalled what the Indians said . . . a curse falls upon those who stay in the Quehatch . . . and he remembered



that tragic misfortune had come to everyone who had come to the valley. "No! What am I thinking such silly things for!" He tried to fill his thoughts with the big black wolf, and how he would go about getting him. Somehow the unpleasant thoughts kept coming back. Had Henry got mixed in that big fight last night? "Huh! I miss getting a sheep and right away begin to think the whole valley is full of evil spirits. It's a beautiful place, this! It's my valley . . . and I'm mighty glad I came."

He went back to the cabin, to get a mug of hot coffee. There was still some oatmeal left from breakfast. This made things seem a lot brighter; and he set out down the valley. He would get back early enough at least to clean out the cabin and cut some fresh boughs for the bunk. Tomorrow would be devoted to getting settled and starting to lay in a supply of winter wood. The clouds had moved halfway up the valley and it still felt like snow; but he could not withstand the curiosity to find out what those wolves were about.

It was more than a mile to the place, but the walking was good and the dead spruce was soon looming up ahead. He moved the rifle a little farther forward in the crook of his arm; began picking his steps more carefully, to avoid any

dead sticks in the trail ; and kept a sharp lookout through the trees ahead. The chance of walking on to wolves in broad daylight was so remote that the effort was hardly worth while, but they had acted very strangely and Jack was inclined to expect anything to happen.

When still some distance away, a musky, obnoxious smell began to cut sharply into Jack's nostrils. "Wolverine!" He sniffed the air and a peculiar sensation flashed through his thoughts. "Que-que-hatch! The Pirate himself. What can he be doing here?" The smell became stronger as he walked on.

Finally he could see the dark object under the trees. "As I expected . . ." It was a very large bull moose. "But it's not Henry." He could see the antlers. That mighty set of horns which Henry carried would never be mistaken. For this he was glad. But it was a kill. Something very powerful had dragged it back under the trees. In one quick sweep his eyes followed the plainly visible course where it had been dragged. Only a big grizzly could do this. He stepped forward and stooped down to examine some sharp digs in a bare spot of the ground. They were the claw marks of a grizzly. At least part of the story was now clear. "Henry must have had that big fight last night. A bull like that would never let any grizzly get close

enough to strike him down, unless he was in a very bad way. He probably lay down to rest . . . and couldn't get up quickly enough. That's the way the bear get them."

He pushed his way through the trees to get a closer look. "Mr. Grizzly had quite a feast . . . and walked away to find a nicer place to sleep it off. The wolves were probably on hand all the time . . . waiting their turn." The stench of the wolverine was so strong that Jack moved back into the open. "But that wolverine got there." A look of disdain and disgust came into Jack's face. "And he fixed it so that nothing else on earth will touch it. What a waste of good meat! Wonder who got there first . . . the wolves or the wolverine? And that big black one, too. Whichever it was, the devil sure took possession. He must be quite an animal."

For some time Jack searched for tell-tale signs. Even where the ground was bare it was much too hard to show anything but the occasional claw marks where the grizzly had dragged his heavy victim. Jack began following the trail of the drag, which was not difficult; and soon came to the place where the bull had lain down and the kill had been made. From signs on the ground, it had been quite a struggle. Then he backtracked farther on. This was not so easy,

although he finally emerged into the large opening among the trees, where the ground was cut up over a wide area.

“What a battle it must have been!” His eyes wandered over the scene, trying to visualize what had taken place. He picked up a small bunch of hair, dug off by a sharp point of horn. “How I would like to have seen it! I should have come out, when I heard them bellowing. And right here in the open . . . in the bright moonlight. The wolves came to watch . . . and that big grizzly . . . and the wolverine. But Henry won. I’m glad of that.”

Turning back, he returned to where the defeated Intruder had come to his unfortunate end. “It’s too bad, old boy . . . but that seems to be the way Nature figures it. The strongest survive . . . and this sort of thing catches up with the weak.” The smell of wolverine cut through his thoughts. “But why does that despicable devil have to come into all this? As long as he’s roaming around there won’t be much use my trying to trap anything else.” Then he made a very determined promise to himself. “I’m going to get that wolverine. He’ll be back . . . that’s for sure. And there’s going to be some of my traps waiting for him. I’m going to get that pirate if it’s the only thing I do this winter.”

Jack hurried back to the cabin and dumped all his traps out of the sack and picked out the six heavy No. 4 traps which had been brought along especially for wolverine and beaver. "I'll just use three." He dropped the rest back with the smaller ones. He laid the traps out on the grass and went into the cabin to prepare some boiling water to pour over them, to kill the human scent.

Jack had carefully planned what was best to do. The Indians preferred a deadfall, claiming that a wolverine which it was impossible to take in a steel trap, would often walk over a log and trip-stick. But the location was not suitable and building a deadfall was a major project. "I'll get him in my traps," he had determined. "I'll use every precaution and trick I know . . . and the quicker I get the Pirate, the better it will be for me . . . and for every animal in the valley."

The sun was well on its way to the western rim of the mountains when Jack went back down the valley. He wore a pair of gloves to handle the traps; a small axe was attached to his belt; and he carried a small coil of wire in his pocket. The rifle was slung over his shoulder by its strap.

He had decided exactly where each trap was to be set and went to work the minute he got

there. With no dead leaves and very little dead grass to hide the traps, he had carefully to dig out a place into which to drive the holding stake and snugly fit the open trap. Then it had to be thinly covered with earth and a scattering of dead spruce needles and grass, to make it appear as natural as possible. One trap was set right up close where the wolverine had previously been eating. The other two were set eight to twelve feet away, where there were natural approaches. The latter was more trouble to hide ; and clusters of dead limbs were dropped on each side as a subtle guide to cause the wolverine to walk on to the trap in the clear passageway between.

He left as quickly as possible after the last set was finished, for the sun was going down and it would not be very long before the Pirate might be coming back. Quite pleased with his handiwork, he crossed the stream and walked briskly back toward the cabin.

It was dark before supper was finished and the dishes washed. The floor had not been swept and the winter's supplies were still piled in a heap in the centre of the room. He sat down on the edge of the bunk, leisurely puffing at his pipe, and stared about. " Tomorrow I'll get this place organized . . . but it seems I've been here for ages." His eyes wandered over

the things lying in confusion on the dirt floor, and moved on to the metal stove, its heavy coating of rust showing where a little while ago there was a cheerful ruddy glow, then to the lone white candle stuck upright on the grease-stained table where he had eaten the evening meal. "It'll take a lot of scrubbing . . . but this is a warm place."

Reaching for the big packsack that contained his clothing and personal things he dragged it between his knees and slowly unfastened the straps. Pushing one hand down inside he soon pulled out a pair of moose hide moccasins which he dropped on the floor. Then his hand went back inside and brought out two photographs in attractive leather frames ; he laid them on the sleeping-bag beside him. When he had taken off the shoe-pacs and slipped on the moccasins, he carried the photographs, one in each hand, close to the light of the candle. One showed the strong, pleasant face of a man whose years had carried him into comfortable circumstances on the shady side of life, without leaving behind all the characteristics of rugged younger years. "You're a wonderful dad . . ." Jack's lips moved slightly as he gazed admiringly at the face. Then his eyes shifted to the other photograph—an attractive young woman. The expression on Jack's face became more serious, as

he held it close to the candle. "And you're really a wonderful person, too." He gazed at the photograph a long time. Then he held them together. "It was really nice of you both to let me come on this crazy jaunt . . ." He abruptly stood up and began looking for a suitable place to set the pictures. A narrow shelf between the window and the bunk seemed the only one. It was dark up there ; but he leaned the photographs against the log, then he returned to his seat and looked thoughtfully at them for several minutes.

He slipped off his outer clothing, blew out the candle and crawled into the sleeping-bag. He was tired, and it was wonderfully relaxing to stretch out between the soft warm blanket lining ; there was something comforting in the complete darkness of the log room. He continued thinking about the two in the photographs on the little shelf. A whole winter could be a mighty long time, and a lot could happen, both here and at home. Maybe he had run away from that which was most important of all to him. But he was very tired . . . and soon lapsed into a deep and pleasant sleep.



## CHAPTER VI ,

### WHEN WINTER COMES

SLEET and rain were falling in a steady drizzle as Jack started down the narrow trail that followed the stream. The valley had become a drab little world, in which everything was wet and cold. The mist and fog hid the tops of the taller trees ; and he knew it was snowing on the mountains, probably down as low as the timber line. A drop of a few degrees and the whole valley would be white. He thought of a lot of things as he moved along—even the gold that lay on the bedrock, such a short distance beyond human reach. “ It can stay there, for all I care . . . ” He quickly turned to other things. “ I must start laying in a supply of winter wood . . . the snow gets deep up here.” There was some repair work to be done on his snowshoes ; keeping supplied with meat might be more of a problem than he expected. “ I’ll need lots of meat, with the appetite I’ve got . . . and I must get that cabin cleaned out.”

The closer he got to where the traps were set, the more briskly he walked and the less

he thought about anything except whether or not he had caught the Pirate. He had tried to keep from speculating on this. Before he crossed the stream, however, his hopes fell. One of the traps which had been set out in the open was sprung and could be seen lying on the ground. Then he saw the other two. They were all sprung . . . and empty.

Coming to the first trap he stooped down to examine the place where he had so carefully concealed it. "Claw marks . . ." He used one finger to flick away the spruce needles and bits of earth to get a better view of the solid ground. "Yes, they are claw marks all right. He dug it out . . . then turned it over and sprung it. No other animal on earth could do that . . ."

Jack moved to the opposite side of the opening where another set had been made near a tip of heavy spruce boughs that came to the ground. Here the trap had been covered mostly with dead grass. As he squatted down, his eyes centred upon a spot of red on a swatch of the dead grass. It was unmistakably fresh blood. He quickly reached for the sprung trap to examine it. But there was not so much as a hair in the steel jaws. "No . . . he dug this one out, too." Dropping the trap, a little impulsively, he picked up the swatch of grass

to examine it more closely. There was no doubt about it.

Stepping briskly to where the third set had been made up close to the moose, he picked up the trap. Before his hand reached it, however, he saw brown hair and a claw held securely on the underside of the tightly clamped jaws. He stared at it intently for several moments ; then laying the trap across his knees he pressed down on the springs until the claw dropped free. Putting it in the palm of his hand he stared at it some more. " It looks like the little toe . . . of the left foot. He must have stepped on the edge. I must have had the trigger set too fine. Gosh ! Why couldn't he have stepped on the pan ! " His fingers closed tightly upon the claw and he looked back at the other traps. " Then he deliberately dug up the other traps . . . just to let me know how smart he is."

Standing up he put the claw into the small pocket of his mackinaw. " I'll keep this . . . until I get the rest of his hide to add to it. But I guess that ends any chances of this place . . ." He slipped the small axe out of its leather scabbard fastened to his belt and began pounding loose the trap stakes. " The Pirate isn't likely to be back here for a while . . . and when he does come, he'll be awfully trap-shy. He'll have a sore foot for some time . . . and

he'll sure be out to get even with me . . . probably lie awake nights thinking how to do it."

Wet and discouraged Jack made his way back through the drizzle of sleet and rain, with the empty traps slung over his shoulder. All the way home he tried to think of ways in which he might get the Pirate. "I might make deadfalls, as the Indians do. Or . . . when the snows come . . . I might track him down . . . keep following his tracks until I run him down, or find his den." After thinking about this for a little while he decided it wasn't a very practical idea. "Even if I found the den, it probably wouldn't do any good. Guess I'll have to depend on my traps, or maybe deadfalls. But one thing is certain . . . there won't be much trouble identifying his tracks, with that one missing toe."

Jack had left the breakfast dishes in his haste to visit the traps, and before he reached the cabin he had decided to spend the day cleaning the place and getting properly settled. It was fairly dry alongside the front of the cabin under the protruding roof ; and after the dishes were done, everything that was movable, except the stove, was carried outside. With a broom made of spruce boughs tightly tied together, the place was thoroughly swept, from the split log ceiling to the hard dirt floor. The little window was

washed, inside and out ; the stove cleaned, inside and out ; and a thick new mattress of spruce bough tips was laid on the bunk. As the things were carried back inside, everything was put in its place. Nails were driven into the logs above the bunk, on which to hang his reindeer parka and extra winter clothing, and over the door, for his rifle. A new piece of oilcloth was put on the table beside the window, and a bright red blanket was spread over the sleeping-bag. The place took on a home-like appearance.

Then he went outside to chop wood and pile it beside the door, in the shelter of the overhanging roof. As he moved out into the birches he noticed the stumps where others before him had harvested wood to keep themselves warm in the little cabin. He wondered what sort of individuals they were. He observed that some of the trees were cut off six or more feet from the ground. "That much snow in here! Wonder which one of them worked on this tree?" These winter-cut stumps made good firewood and he started chopping one down. "Wonder if the Pirate was around when he was here? A wolverine could be that old. The Pirate may have been around when all of them were here . . . and maybe he gave them all trouble."

The heavy weather seemed to deaden the sound as the axe bit sharply into the solid wood. Jack had always been handy with an axe and he kept steadily at the task, carrying each arm-load that was cut to pile it alongside the front of the cabin. The day passed quickly. Deprived of the prolonged afterglow of a clear evening, darkness began to settle early and rapidly ; and as night approached, a scattering of snow began to come down with the sleet and rain. It was wet snow, but it gave mute testimony that winter was near. Sometimes it snowed much earlier, at this altitude, only to melt away. But this appeared to be the real thing, and if the sleet and wet snow froze on the ground, it would make travelling and trapping difficult.

The cabin was warm and cosy that evening, as he stretched out on top of the red blanket to enjoy an after-supper smoke. Outside the snow was slowly piling up on the ground and occasionally the wind blew the icy particles against the window with a soft tinkling sound, and it scratched against the section of stove-pipe that stuck up above the roof. He was half conscious of these sounds, and what was going on outside, as he lay quietly gazing in the direction of the candle standing in the centre of the table. The bright new oilcloth reflected the soft glow up

across the black window and spread out in rapidly diminishing light, that became lost in the far corners of the room. He puffed occasionally on his pipe and watched the grey smoke drift upward to disappear. Then a slight scratching sound caused him to become alert. Holding his breath, he listened intently. It was not the wind or the snow. "Huh . . . I have a visitor," he thought. The sound came from under the foot of the bunk. Once again he heard it. Trying not to make any noise, he slowly leaned over until it was possible to look down on the floor alongside the bunk. It was rather dark down there, but he patiently watched and waited. A slender little head finally appeared. It was pure white, with tiny black eyes that glistened like shiny glass beads, and a trace of long dark whiskers hung down over the corners of its little mouth. The head turned as quickly as it had appeared and the little creature stared straight up at him. "Well, well! Hello, Bright Eyes!" Jack tried not to move or make any sound. Then the long neck and short little front feet came into view, followed by a slender body, and finally the pencil-like tail, tipped with black. "Just come right in and make yourself at home." Jack smiled as he watched. "This cabin is plenty big enough for us both." Suspiciously the weasel moved on

under the table, sniffing and looking about ; then it suddenly turned and disappeared under the bunk.

“ If I’d known you were coming, I’d have put out something to eat.” Jack leaned farther out, in an effort to look under the bunk. “ He must have a nest under the back logs and has been living in here all along. That’s all right with me. Hope he keeps right on.” After watching and listening for some time, Jack stretched out on the bunk again. “ He’ll be back . . . that’s for sure. Wish I had some fresh meat to leave for him. Maybe he’d go for some bacon. I’ve got to encourage the little fellow.”

When his pipe was smoked out he got up and cut some pieces off the lean part of the one small slab of bacon that had been brought in. “ I’ll wish I had that bit of bacon before the winter is over . . .” he thought as the pieces were dropped on the floor at the end of the bunk and under the table. “ You’d better appreciate them. But just wait until I get a good supply of fresh meat. Then you’ll have a feast.”

He went outside to take a look at the weather. The snow had begun to settle on the ground, freezing as fast as it fell. The night was black and the damp cold had a biting unpleasantness. Going back into the warm cabin he closed the door tightly and was soon in bed.



In the morning there was about an inch of hard snow on the ground. It was frozen solid underneath and there was a coating of ice on the trees and on the rocks along the edge of the stream. An opening had to be broken where he washed his face and the water was unusually cold. Dark clouds hung solidly over the valley, resting on the mountains at about the timber line. It was not the most pleasant way for winter to settle down for a long stay.

He was anxious to start trapping ; but not all of the fur bearers' pelts were yet in full prime. On the inside of some of the skins there might still be a streak of black running down the middle of the back. Jack was very conscious of the quality of furs. He had been born and brought up in the business. From the time he was able to walk, he had found a deep pleasure in handling and carrying around the bundles of fine skins that every year jammed the big storeroom which had been part of the family house ; and from the start his father had taught him to know fur and to love it. Even after Jack's mother died and they left the trading post to move into the big house in town, he had continued to go back as often as he could when the shipments of skins were coming in from the many remote outposts of his father's trading empire, that reached as far into the Arctic as Kotzebue Sound,

the mouth of the Mackenzie, and to Great Bear Lake.

Right now he had his own trapping problems to meet, in the fulfilment of one of those boyhood desires. The survey which had been made of the Quehatch from up on the mountain had given him little more than a general idea of the valley. It must be gone over on foot to decide where the traps should be set ; and he did not have too many to put out. The beaver pond was the one definite location he had in mind. The valley should be gone over as far as the glacier and he should cover every section including the larger side valleys. So he decided to spend the day going to the upper end and walking down.

The timber extended almost the full five miles or more to the glacier. About halfway up from the cabin the stream bed began to spread out into a rocky flat, overgrown with scattered areas of tall grass and clumps of brush. It stretched almost across the whole valley at the foot of the glacier.

The frozen snow was too hard to show the tracks of an animal even heavy as a wolf, although he crossed several places where the sharp hoofs of moose had cut into the ground ; and he was about two miles from the glacier when three of the animals were seen near the

opposite side of the open flat that ran through the centre of the valley. There was an old cow and a young one, and a spikehorn bull. It was somewhat farther from home than he had hoped to find meat ; but he decided to go on to the upper end, keeping along the north side, then cross and work down to get a closer look at the young bull.

It was difficult to see any of the tell-tale signs which would furnish information regarding the fur bearers, although the whole country gave the feeling there were plenty of the animals around ; and very pleased with the trapping prospects he crossed just below the glacier and travelled more briskly back to where the moose had been seen. They were easily located ; and after putting the binoculars on the spikehorn, Jack decided to take him. Moving through the trees to within little more than thirty yards, a single shot in the neck was so instantaneous that the young bull never knew what struck him.

The day was already more than half gone, but Jack managed to get the meat back to the cabin in two trips ; although darkness had completely closed in before it was hung safely from the limb of a nearby spruce. One of the previous occupants had trimmed away all the lower branches, and completely encircled the trunk with tin from large cans nailed on in a wide

band, to prevent any wolverine or other marauders from climbing up to cut down the suspended meat. Very tired but in much better spirits, Jack enjoyed a big feed of fried moose liver ; and left a feast of fresh meat to be enjoyed by Bright Eyes during the night.

There was more snow in the morning, and it was soft enough to take the tracks of a field mouse. It also made walking much easier. He hurried through breakfast to get started for the beaver pond. A strong urge to take a few traps along was debated until the last of the dishes were washed ; but finally even the rifle was left behind.

The wind had gone down, although still from the west. Jack instinctively decided to go straight across the valley, so as to approach the beaver dam into the wind and not to give warning to any animals that might be there. He hoped to see Henry and his family ; and it was the sort of place where almost anything might be lurking around.

He had not gone a dozen steps beyond the edge of the stream bed when he came to something which caused him to stop abruptly. It was several trails in the snow. The tracks had been made before it stopped snowing and were partly covered over, but their identity was clear at the first glance. They were the tracks of

wolves ; and they had stopped there apparently to look across the stream at the cabin. " It was the fresh meat that attracted them." He quickly looked back to make sure the moose quarters were still safe. Moving on a little way, where the tracks were strung out more clearly, he looked them over critically. " One is certainly a whopper . . ." He stooped down to make a closer examination. " Wonder if it is that big black one I saw from up on the mountain ? " His eyes moved on to the other tracks. " Two big ones and three small ones. It must be a family running together in a pack."

Returning to the edge of the stream bed his eyes made a quick sweep up along it. " Yes, they crossed up there." He followed the tracks, in a swing out through the birches at the back of the cabin and back to the big spruce where the moose meat was hanging. " Just as I thought." There were tracks all around, showing they had been there for a considerable time. It was also evident that they had leaped into the air in futile attempts to get hold of the meat. " Maybe I'd better take the rifle along . . ."

Instead of returning to the cabin, however, he resumed his trip across the valley, making only passing observations as he occasionally crossed the tracks of animals that had travelled

that way during the night. There was always a temptation to stop, for he greatly enjoyed reading the signs and speculating about them—and the snow is such a wonderful recorder of the things that go on in the wilderness. One glance was all that was required to identify each trail ; but there was much more that could be learned, if one followed them. There were fox, lynx, weasel, squirrel and occasionally a marten, but mostly they had been made by rabbits.

Just before he reached the beaver pond he met the tracks of the five wolves again. They were much fresher here, having been made after the snow had stopped falling. He stooped down and looked at the clear imprint of the big one. The hind foot was fully ten inches across. "He must weigh at least a hundred and fifty pounds ; and I'll bet his black hide would go nine feet in length. How I'd like to get that one."

As they were travelling in the general direction which Jack was going he followed until the tracks came out at the water's edge. Stopping in the trees, he made a survey of the opposite shore and as far as he could see in all directions, before stepping out in the open. The wolf tracks followed the edge of the pond, passing through occasional clumps of tall grass and then cutting back into the timber. "They've

gone up into the little valley . . . probably have a den somewhere up there. If I had the rifle I'd be tempted to follow those tracks. But there will be another time for that."

He had a good view of the dam which the beavers had built across the mouth of the side valley. It was an old dam and a very good one. As his eyes moved about he noticed there was not a sign of even a rotted stump in the smooth expanse of water. " Their ancestors must have made this lake hundreds of years ago . . . for there must have been some trees standing out there at one time." At the marshy upper end he noticed three large beaver houses rising above the yellow grass. " There are probably more farther up. What a place to trap beaver . . . when it freezes over." The thought was quickly followed by the realization that trapping beaver, under the best of circumstances, is a wet, cold and disagreeable task. " But the beaver market should be good this year ; and the skins from up here will be tops."

He moved down closer to the dam. The work which the little engineers had recently done in preparing it for winter was plainly evident. With his binoculars he examined some of these places. They had been busy since the snow had fallen. He also put the glasses on some sharply cut tracks that went up into the timber

beyond the far end of the dam. "Looks like Henry and his family might have gone up there, to find a dry place to lie down. I'd hoped to see the old boy."

After looking over the place with the binoculars, he decided to go back to the cabin without wandering about around the lake. It was not that he feared the beavers or other residents might move out if they found his tracks. They would become well aware of his presence when he set the traps, anyhow; but until that time he preferred to leave them undisturbed. He had seen more than enough. As he turned back toward home, his attention returned to some equally important unfinished business with an evil character whom he had appropriately chosen to think of as the Pirate.



## CHAPTER VII

### · ENEMY TRAILS THAT CROSS

THE days passed slowly, as winter wavered between taking over in the complete manner in which she was generally accustomed, or giving a slight respite from the deep snow and bitter cold that was sure to come. It snowed, half-heartedly ; then the temperature took a sudden drop. Nearly all the leaves had been beaten off the trees and all the gay autumn colours were gone when the sun shone down upon the valley again.

The weather had broken the normal routines of life of nearly all of the animals in the Quehatch ; although most of them took it with quiet complacence. Being hungry is a familiar experience among wild creatures. Those who work hard for what they get, among animals as well as humans, are the least likely to complain when circumstances deprive them of things which seem essential ; and it is only the indolently fat and lazy who usually display bad temper because of life's inconveniences.

The Pirate had more than the weather to blame for his empty stomach. He had been

nursing a sore foot that hurt his pride a lot more than the pain bothered him. His disposition had been put into a very bad state. He had remained in the den most of the time, coming outside the entrance occasionally to snarl at the weather and the whole world in general, then limp back inside to continue grumbling over the misadventure to one small toe on his left front foot.

There were many things beyond the comprehension of his animal mind. The normal processes of his life had always been dependent upon his bull strength, rather than mental alertness. He had his full share of sharp sagacity, to be sure ; but it was channelled into the rather limited fundamentals of his impious trade. Slow and methodical, and very seldom challenged by those upon whom he preyed, his mental reactions were not as highly developed as among those who had to be constantly alert for personal survival. There were certain things about humans of which he was thoroughly aware. He knew they set the steel traps, with which he had in the past become intimately familiar ; and that they always lived in the log cabin beside the stream. His knowledge had increased with each of the humans who had come to the valley. He had dug out and upset so many of their traps that he had become a little

disdainful of them. But being caught in one, even to the mere extent of a little toe, had fired a desire to retaliate against the cause of this painful insult. What made matters worse for his disposition was that he did not know how to approach this important matter.

Walking on the frozen snow was difficult, even without a lame foot ; and where the surface was crusted over it was so noisy that stalking prey was a waste of time. His hairy, padded feet were tough and normally an excellent safeguard against slipping, with the claws always available for assistance when required ; but to walk any great distance over frozen roughness on the ground was not a pleasant prospect. Hunger and the prospect of a clear night, however, sent him on his way.

. He had hardly got out into the valley when the wind brought two faint scents which cut sharply into his nostrils. One was smoke from the cabin stove and the other was fresh meat. For some time he stood sampling the scents ; then he took a course directly into the wind.

There were only stars in the dark velvet of the sky. Underneath the trees was a black opaque. The Pirate did not mind the darkness, but the constant crunch of his steps annoyed him. Occasionally another resident of the valley was heard scurrying away and he stopped to

listen. The fact they were hastily getting out of his way was a slight satisfaction. Breaking through the icy crust proved an increasing inconvenience because of his front left foot. He was soon picking the easiest places to travel and occasionally limping along on three legs. All this added to his bad temper.

As he came closer to the cabin and the smell of fresh meat became stronger, the soreness of his foot was supplanted by thoughts of feasting until he could eat no more. When the yellow light of the window showed through the trees he stopped to stare at it. Then he remembered and bared his teeth, puffing hot breath into the cold air. The man who set traps was inside where the light shone. If he could only get into the cabin, when its hated occupant was away, he would tear the place to pieces and leave everything unfit for future use. The idea gradually took root and became impressed so deeply that it was not likely to disappear.

Making a wide survey well at the back of the cabin he cautiously approached until he finally stood directly under the meat. With nostrils distended he sniffed heavily, staring up at the wonderful feast. He tried to stand on his hind legs and pawed the air, grimacing and making a soft rattling sound deep in his throat. Moving over to the base of the tree he put both front

feet up on the tin which encased the trunk. This was not the first time the tin had stopped him from climbing up to cut down meat ; but he tried again and again, only to have his claws slip off without finding the slightest hold. He moved all around the tree, searching for a better place to get up. Then he tried to tear the tin off with his teeth ; but he only cut his lips on the sharp corners which he managed to turn up. Finally he stood staring up at the meat, his hot breath puffing wisps of vapour into the frosty air. He walked closer to the cabin, growling deep in his throat and walking stiff legged, as though he would like to tear the log dwelling apart. Then he returned to try again to get up the tree.

When the Pirate left the den there were two possibilities uppermost in his thoughts. He had debated going directly to the one place where food was certain to be found in plenty ; although the recollection of a painful and embarrassing experience was still too fresh in his memory to let even an empty stomach give him much encouragement. The other course was one which he sometimes followed when circumstances made food difficult to procure by ordinary methods. That was the beaver pond. Beavers were fat and tasty, and they were quite easy to capture when ambushed away from the

water. But the noisy crust on the snow was a safeguard against any creature being caught by surprise.

Finding himself completely frustrated in getting at Jack's supply of meat, he reluctantly abandoned the attempt. Once again he moved closer to the cabin. Sniffing continually and with every other sense of apprehension intently alert, he moved cautiously up until he could touch his nose to the earth embankment that was piled against the base logs on three sides. Passing slowly around the back, he stopped stiffly when he came into view of the light from the window. It startled him a little to be so near this strange phenomenon, which was so closely associated with the arch enemy he knew was inside the log dwelling. The path of light that spread feebly out over the frozen snow and faded into the darkness at the edge of the trees, intrigued him. But he did not stay long to stare at it. He turned back and hurried out into the birches, before swinging wide out around the cabin toward the stream. Several times he stopped to gaze at the lighted window ; and when he came to where the bank dropped down to the wide gravel stream bed, he turned and stood watching for some time.

About to continue on his way, he suddenly crouched down close to the ground, as the cabin

door opened and Jack came outside. The Pirate, with his chin almost resting on the frozen snow and his yellow teeth bared, watched almost breathlessly as the two-legged occupant walked out to the hanging moose meat. Stretching his arms up it was barely possible for Jack to reach the lowest portion of the meat. With a hunting knife he cut off a few small bits. Carrying these titbits in the palm of one hand, he went back into the cabin, closing the door behind him.

The Pirate did not move for several moments after Jack had disappeared. He growled softly, deep in his throat. Then he slowly straightened up, slipped down into the stream bed, and picking his way from rock to rock across the ice-cluttered water, quickly disappeared into the black shadows that engulfed the trees beyond.

The way to the beaver pond was a familiar one. Experience had taught him the easiest way to get there, as well as the best angle of approach to catch unsuspecting local residents wood-cutting away from the safety of their artificial lake. The icy ground would make the project which he had in mind, particularly advantageous to himself. He liked projects which gave him the advantage.

When still some distance from the pond he came to the tracks which Jack had made on his visit to the same location, by a different route.

The footprints were little more than icy blotches, but they were immediately identified. More than once before the Pirate had followed similar tracks to the beaver pond to find an appetizing supper in the traps that had been set. He took up the trail, a little more briskly. The long walk had made his foot lame ; but this was forgotten as he approached the pond. He had not gone much farther when he came to where Jack had picked up the wolf tracks. The big black canine and his grey mate had been well known to the wolverine for a good many years. There were no other inhabitants of the Quehatch he disliked more ; and he knew that the attitude was mutual. On more than one occasion the Pirate had found kills they had made and appropriated them for his own use ; and on several occasions they had come very close to settling their enmity in a manner which could easily have proved permanently decisive for one or the other. He knew that Blackie was that kind of creature ; but somehow he had always managed to outbluff the big wolf, avoiding a serious conflict. When Blackie and his mate had two or more big whelps running with them, the Pirate had exercised more than ordinary discretion, or kept well out of their way ; for he knew that wolves did not run in a pack just because they enjoyed each other's company.



When the tracks came to the beaver pond the Pirate stopped in the edge of the timber, just as Jack had done, and carefully surveyed all that could be seen around the water's edge. Beyond the opposite shore line, the darkness among the trees was much too black for even his nocturnal eyesight. But what he could not see could easily be heard in the blackness beyond.

He noticed that the two trails separated here ; the wolves' trail going up the little valley toward their den and the man's turning toward the dam. He had not seen even the wake of a single beaver swimming across the still surface of the water, although he knew there were plenty of them around, for the air was heavy with their musky odour. He knew where all the houses were and where the beavers frequently went up the stream to cut willows and birches for food and building material. The urge to go hunting was strong ; but he waited patiently, watching and listening.

It was not very long before there was an abrupt crashing sound of a falling tree, down below the dam. He hesitated only a moment. The beavers did not cut down a tree of that size every night and it meant that more than one of the fat and furry little workers would be on hand to gnaw off the limbs and drag them back

to the pond. He fairly leaped out on to the open shore and started toward the dam as fast as he could go. As he did so there was the loud sharp crack of a beaver's tail slapped on the water as a warning signal. He knew the meaning of this sound, too ; and he went even faster. His gait, combined with a half-limp to favour the left front foot, gave his squat body an almost awkward movement ; and the long brown hair that hung down from the sides, flopped up and down. He made enough noise to be heard by a keen ear at least half a mile away, as he went pounding down over the noisy shell of ice which covered the snow along the shore.

Ignoring the lame foot, with only four claws for climbing, he scrambled up over the dam, where it spread out beyond the edge of the water, and galloped on through the scattered clump of willows and tall grass. Stopping for a brief moment to listen, he heard two or more beavers climbing hurriedly up the ice-coated logs farther ahead. Then one of them splashed into the water. He also heard a tell-tale crunching sound out in the willows, and raced in that direction.

It was all over in a very few moments. The young beaver fought back bravely, slashing out with his four slender teeth, contrived for cutting

wood rather than self-defence against a powerful antagonist.

Other sharp ears had heard the falling tree and the beaver's signal of warning ; and they had followed the other sounds which led to the scuffle in the willow thickets. One of these, who had been only a short distance away, snorted as he walked slowly and suspiciously toward the scene, with his great antlers held high. Henry had a friendly feeling toward the beavers, whom he so frequently saw during the times when he was in the vicinity of their lake. Normally he paid little attention to them, as they waddled industriously about their work on the dam and among the nearby trees, sometimes passing almost under his nose. When they cut down a tree he occasionally wandered over to nibble the tender twigs out of the top ; and they never showed the slightest reluctance to have him share their harvest. He often chased lynx and even the wolves away, when he got the idea they were prowling in search of the beavers.

As the bull came closer he caught the scent of wolverine and the hair rose up on his shoulders. Before he got close enough to see the unwanted intruder, however, his head swung abruptly around as he stopped to listen to the sounds of new footsteps on the crusted snow. Then he

turned about and went striding briskly to rejoin his family.

There were others who had the same idea which had brought the Pirate to the beaver pond. Blackie and his pack had little trouble in catching rabbits in almost any sort of weather ; but hunting as they did, mostly by sight rather than trailing by scent, the noisy footing made their method difficult and prompted easier ways of satisfying their hungry stomachs. This night the black leader had brought his pack down out of the Little Quehatch, keeping in the heavy stand of trees where there was less crust on the snow. They had kept up fairly close to the steep side wall of the valley and had stopped a little above the upper end of the pond. There Blackie had stood listening, for a long time. From the vantage point he could detect the sound of almost any movement across the valley floor. The brittle crust acted as a sounding board, which sent the footsteps resounding almost like taps on an Indian drum. The wolves had heard the Pirate's approach, long before he came to the edge of the pond. They had all listened carefully, trying to decide what it might be. The whelps had started to go over and find out ; but one sharp growl from the old one stopped them.

When the tree went down the whole pack

came on to their toes ; and the hurried footsteps down the opposite shore of the pond brought the heavy ruff of hair up on Blackie's neck. He listened a little longer, to make sure what was going on, then he led the way through the trees toward the near end of the big beaver dam.

The Pirate had paid but little attention to the bull moose, as he settled down to enjoy his supper. Even if Henry had charged, it was an easy matter to get out of the way and the interruption would have little more than a nuisance value. But the sounds of the other approaching footsteps brought his head up sharply. There was no doubt in his mind as to their identity ; and his whole face wrinkled until his teeth showed to the gums. One front foot was planted impulsively upon the limp form that lay in front of him and he moved around to stand defiantly awaiting the arrival.

Blackie came to within little more than a dozen steps before he stopped. The three young ones crowded in close behind, moving restlessly in their tracks, while the mother stood a short distance away. The hair on Blackie's neck was up like the feathers of a strutting grouse ; his nostrils twitched as they sampled the smell of warm beaver meat ; and he stood very stiffly.

With the one paw still clamped solidly upon

his prize, the wolverine half crouched over it, his broad head pulled back and his whole countenance a grimacing display of defiance. He suddenly lunged forward, all four feet digging into the ground as he barked a savage challenge. But Blackie did not move; only a nervous twitching of his upper lip uncovered the tips of two heavy teeth. The Pirate stopped as abruptly as he had started; and the two glared at each other only a few short steps apart. The succulent smell of warm meat was too much of a stimulant for the empty stomachs of the whelps and one of them darted in with a sudden urge to grab the seemingly unprotected beaver. But the Pirate lurched about and was upon the young wolf before he hardly knew what was happening. He was struck with claws and teeth, with such force and fury that he was knocked sprawling with yelps of pain. At the same moment Blackie rushed in and his jaws clamped like a steel trap upon the back of the wolverine's neck. This was a situation in which the Pirate's mind worked quickly, for it was a part of his profession and the foundation of his existence. He knew that wolves ran together for mutual assistance; and while he might whip them, one at a time, they would collectively tear him to pieces in very short order. His bluffing strategy had failed. Like

a flash he rolled his stocky body over with such violent force that even the powerful Blackie was pulled off his feet and had to release the hold he had in the thick hair and tough hide ; and the Pirate was up squarely on his feet and set for further defence before any of the others could close in. One of the other young ones had made an attempt ; but a sharp slap of knife-like claws slashed across his nose and sent him in whimpering retreat.

Slowly the Pirate backed away. Blackie followed him, step by step. The young wolves grabbed the beaver and started scuffling for its possession. The big black wolf stopped and growled as he glanced back. The wolverine kept slowly backing away, still with menacing defiance. Then with one final snarl he cautiously turned and soon disappeared into the blackness that shrouded the 'hickets.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A DIFFICULT TASK

THE big white flakes filled the air, drifting down quietly and continuously, from before daylight until after darkness, then through another night and more than another day.

There was little reason for man or beast to do anything but stay at home, for the air was so dense with the swirling flakes that the senses of sight, smell or hearing were of little service. Jack remained close to the cabin, devoting his time to adding to the store of stove wood that was piled in a double stack on both sides of the doorway. The long evenings were passed in doing little chores that made the time go faster. He readjusted the foot straps on his snowshoes ; whittled out some skin stretchers ; and built a new shelf to hold most of the supplies. He also made some progress in cultivating friendly relations with Bright Eyes, the weasel, who came very regularly to get the meals of moose meat scraps which were always waiting for him on the floor. At first Jack put them under the foot of the bunk ; but each time the tempting titbits were dropped a little farther out in the



cabin. The friendship was still a rather distant and suspicious one, with the little white visitor always ready to dash away on the slightest excuse.

Then, during the night the weather cleared once more. This was evident as Jack opened his eyes and looked out of the warm sleeping-bag. Daylight gleamed through the snow-packed little window with a pleasant brilliance ; and he jumped out to start the fire. Instead of slipping back into the blankets to wait for the cabin to get warm, as he usually did, he hurriedly put on his clothes.

He pulled open the door and stepped out under the protruding roof. The Quehatch spread before him in a striking scene of winter beauty. The snow began in an almost vertical wall about a foot deep around the edge of the crude little porch, and it stretched away to the tallest tip of the mountains against the pale blue of the sky across the valley. The unseen sun was just spreading a ribbon of burnished brightness across the tops of the cold peaks and streaking the sky with a golden glow. Down below, the whole valley was a symphony of immaculate whiteness. The fluffy snow was heaped upon every tree, even perched on the naked arms of the birches and willows. Several stumps that stood between the cabin and the

creek were capped with bulging mushrooms of the snow that had accumulated in fantastic fashion upon them. Jack stood motionless for a long time letting his gaze move out over the scene. "It's just like a beautiful Christmas card . . ." he whispered slowly to himself.

He went inside and put on his high mukluks. He got the water pail and waded out toward the stream. The trail that he broke was like an ugly scar on the smooth whiteness that stretched away unmarred in every direction. As far as he could see there was no track even of a pine squirrel; and there was not even a winter bird in sight. There was a deep silence. The water in the stream was quiet, as it flowed in black ribbons of velvet between the snow-capped stones that studded its course like giant pearls.

An hour or so later Jack was making his way through the birches at the back of the cabin. The snow was not deep enough or solid enough for snowshoes; but he travelled silently upon it. Over his shoulder was hung the canvas bag containing all six of the heaviest steel traps and a couple of pounds of frozen moose meat which had been trimmed off in small pieces. "I'll head straight for the base of the mountain . . ." His eyes roamed out over the snow as he moved along. "This couldn't be better to find out

what's going on around here. If I don't find his trail on this side of the valley . . . I'll cross to the other side. And if I don't find him today . . . I will tomorrow."

Once he was in the heavier timber the tracks of snowshoe rabbits began to appear. Their broad hairy hind feet somehow found support on the fluffy snow. In places it seemed as though a dozen of them had held a convention, although Jack knew that one or two could make a lot of tracks in a night. Once he came to a long, narrow opening through the heavily covered trees and stopped to gaze at the view of the mountain which towered up into the blue sky beyond. "Wonder how Junior is making out up there? It's kinda tough for him . . ."

He put the binoculars on the big ridge where he had stalked the little band; but could find no sign of life or tracks through the snow. "No more grass for them this winter. They've moved down somewhere to the edge of the timber . . . or into one of the little valleys . . . where there's alders and willows." Tucking the binoculars back under his mackinaw coat, he moved on.

There was an occasional trail of a fur bearer.

"There are more fox around here than I thought." He stopped and carefully flicked away the snow that had fallen in and covered

unusually large tracks. "Wonder if that big fellow is a black . . ."

Finally he saw a trail which caused his steps to quicken. The tracks were considerably larger than any of the others, strung out in almost a straight line, evenly spaced and with slight difference between the marks of the fore and hind feet. It was unmistakably a wolverine. He picked a spot where the snow was shallow and stooping down began using one finger to clear out the snow that covered an imprint of the left front foot. He got down on his knees to look at the track. Then he moved on to examine another. "The outside toe is missing!" Knowing that the hind feet of a wolverine leave the imprint of only four toes, while the fore feet have five, he cleared away a series of tracks to make certain he was not mistaken. "It's the Pirate!" Standing up he beat the snow off his clothing. "There's no doubt about it. It's the Pirate, all right!"

The trail was going down the valley; and the animal had come along here before the snow had stopped falling. Jack stood for some time, determining exactly how much snow was covering the tracks and debating the best course to follow. There was a strong urge to backtrack the trail, to where the Pirate had left his den. He was probably there now. "It's important

to find where he lives . . .” He visualized setting traps around the entrance of the den. “No, that wouldn’t be good. I’d never get him that way. It would make him more suspicious . . . and he might move to a new location. I mustn’t go too close to the den. Wonder if he came back on this side . . . or crossed the creek to the other side of the valley?” It was possible this was the return trail and the den was down below.

He did not follow the trail in either direction, but started straight for the mountain. The other trails had not lost their interest, and little passed unobserved, although the one purpose now uppermost in his thoughts was to find the trail where the Pirate had returned to his den.

As the base of the mountain came closer, his spirits declined. To make sure that the wolverine had not climbed higher up, Jack found a place where there was an unobstructed view up one of the rock slides that extended far above the timber line; and the binoculars made a slow scanning trip upwards farther than anything but a sheep would go.

Turning back he cut out across the valley to pick up the trail farther below. “I’ll follow those tracks, if it takes all day.”

The trail was found more quickly than he had expected, for the Pirate had swung in close to

the mountain. As he started along the trail, he felt that he began a long and possibly fruitless quest. The trail might go for miles. It reminded him of the old time Indian story of Koyukuns, the fabulous hunter of the days long before the first white man came to Alaska, who could track down a moose on his snowshoes, until the animal was so exhausted it would stumble to a stand-still and Koyukuns would finish it off with his native copper knife, and then carry the whole beast home on his back. This was only one of the many stories he had heard about the fabulous hunter of the Tenan Kutchin people. Very vividly now he recalled them, and how he had as a boy so often heard them from the lips of his mother's brother ; and he remembered how each of these stories had always been ended : " You, my sister's son, have the blood of Koyukuns in your own heart." It was that ending which had always given the stories their strongest appeal.

A few hours later it became evident the wolverine was returning to the moose kill where Jack had set out his first traps. " I should have known this spell of bad weather would drive him back there. If I'd only come down yesterday . . . the snow would have covered up everything . . . and I might have got him."

When the trail crossed the creek and led up

to its destination, Jack's feeling of confidence was given something of a setback. The Pirate's tracks went straight to where the first trap had been set. He had approached to within two or three feet and stopped ; backed away a few steps ; and moved around to approach the spot from a different angle. Then he had dug down to the ground where the trap had been carefully hidden. Jack's gaze moved on, to where the Pirate had made a similar inspection of the places where the other two traps had been set. But he had not gone so close to the one where he had lost a toe. He went to a new place ; and there was no doubt he had enjoyed all of the frozen meat his stomach could possibly hold.

A little discouraged, Jack picked up the trail where it left the scene. " It looks like I've got myself tangled up with a wise old devil . . . But I've got to get him . . . if I take any fur out of this valley." The trail led back up the valley, a little in from the bank of the Quehatch. The traps were getting heavy and his stomach had begun to feel empty. Then another thought came to him. " Maybe he's not so smart as I've been thinking he is. I got one of his toes." He pushed his fingers into the pocket to feel the little memento. " It was only a bit of bad luck that the trap didn't get the whole foot,

Bad luck . . .” the thought gave him a peculiarly unpleasant feeling.

As the tracks continued farther and farther in the direction of the cabin, Jack became slightly embarrassed. After following the trail most of the day in a wide sweep down through the valley, it was now becoming evident it was leading him right back to the place where he had started out in the morning.

When the wolverine’s trail was directly opposite the cabin, it turned sharply and approached the edge of the trees and thick brush where a clear view of the cabin across the creek was to be had. The tracks showed that the Pirate had stood there for some time. “Well I’ll be darned!” Jack recalled how he had first come out of the cabin in the morning and had the feeling there was not a track in the snow as far as he could see. Even when he came to the creek for water, he had seen no indication or had an inkling that any creature had come so close. “And the Pirate . . . of all things! Right in my front yard!”

There was no sign of smoke at the top of the stove-pipe, but he knew it was warm and cosy inside. His trousers were plastered with frozen snow which had been rubbed into them during the long trek, and were stiff and cold. The temptation of hot coffee and fried moose meat



was difficult to resist. It would not be very long before the sun would slip below the southwestern rim of the mountains. He glanced down the valley and noticed snow clouds making up in the west. "More snow." He had the feeling that once he went inside the cabin, the day would be gone.

Turning abruptly, he backtracked the wolverine trail to where it continued on its way up the valley. A half-mile above the cabin it crossed the stream and headed for the mountain. He walked more briskly than before. The tracks took a straight course and there was little doubt they were leading directly to the Pirate's den.

A canyon began to show through the trees ahead and the destination became evident. Jack stopped. "Yes . . . that's it . . . somewhere up in that canyon. Maybe I shouldn't go too close. But how can I be sure?" Above the canyon there was no other break in the mountain for a mile or more. "That has to be the place. Yes . . . here's where I go into business."

Jack stood thoughtfully. One thing was quite certain—the wolverine would be travelling back and forth through this immediate vicinity practically every night, as long as he was not forced to take up residence somewhere else.

He would probably leave by the same route ; although his return would be governed by where he had gone during the night. He would be hungry when he started out ; and probably have a full stomach on the return. " If I was a wise old wolverine . . ." Jack tried to put himself in the Pirate's position. " And if I had just lost a little toe in a trap . . ." One by one he thought of every type of set that was used by white men or Indians, and even gave consideration to waiting in ambush to shoot the wolverine when he came out of the canyon for his nightly trip through the valley in search of food.

Still undecided on the best plan, he left the trail and started toward the base of the mountain, to pick up the tracks where the Pirate had gone down the valley. Occasionally he got a glimpse of the setting sun through the snow-covered trees and knew it would not be long before the shadows would disappear and twilight begin fading into darkness. There was now a scattering of clouds overhead. It was getting colder ; his clothing felt stiff and uncomfortable ; and his mukluks were hard as boards.

The trail showed up some distance ahead and he stopped to look around. A hundred yards or so down the valley a rock slide ran almost to

the heavy timber. An old dead spruce rose at the base of the slide and there were many large hulks of rock that had rolled down from the cliffs far above. As he approached this location his spirits began to rise again. The wolverine trail went close to the big dead tree, between the sprawling base and a large clump of brush on the lower end of the slide. "He's probably walked through there hundreds of times." Jack surveyed the little passageway and the surrounding ground, foot by foot. "I couldn't find a better place . . ."

Keeping in the edge of the timber he went well below the big dead tree that stood out in the open. Hanging his mackinaw on a spruce, he cut a long green bough and went out to make the first set. He dug out a place right where the wolverine had stepped close to the base of the dead tree and set one of the big No. 4 traps. He wired the chain to an exposed root of the tree and covered everything over with the soft dry snow. Then he used the spruce bough to smooth out the surface all around. He laid several pieces of the moose meat on the surface nearby. Then he backed away as he had come, switching the spruce bough back and forth across the snow to cover up all visual signs of the tracks he had made.

Two other traps were set a little farther on,

where large rocks and clumps of brush formed natural passageways that might cause the Pirate to step where the traps were hidden. Near each set the pieces of moose meat were liberally scattered around ; and everywhere Jack stepped he smoothed the snow carefully over as he backed away.

It started to snow before he reached the cabin. This was good. By morning everything would be covered over, leaving no sign of the tracks that had been made. Even if the snow piled up a foot or more in depth, the keen nose of the wolverine would not miss the pieces of moose meat that had been scattered around ; and if hunger or curiosity took him where he was supposed to go, one of the hidden traps was pretty sure to snap shut and hold him beyond escape.

## CHAPTER IX

### ILL OMENS

IF Jack had been able to foresee the weather as well as his four-footed neighbours had, he would not have set out any traps that day ; and if he could have foretold the future, he might well have packed up what he could carry and left the Quehatch to its wild inhabitants and its legend of evil omen to trespassing humans. But he was very contented that evening in the warm retreat of the little cabin. A fresh change of clothing and a big steak of tender moose made everything seem very agreeable.

With the dishes washed and some tempting pieces of meat laid under the table for Bright Eyes, he stretched out on the bunk to enjoy his pipe. The aromatic smell of tobacco smoke mixed pleasantly with that of burning birch and the lingering taste of a good supper. The little candle flickered quietly, spreading out its soft glow to add a cheerful note to the small room.

His attention was drawn to the floor underneath the table. There was the weasel enjoying one of the pieces of meat. " Hi, Bright Eyes ! "

Jack spoke softly, and the sleek little creature's pointed head snapped around at the sound. "Go right ahead and enjoy your supper. You're as safe in here as the gold on the Quehatch bedrock." The weasel wavered between flight and remaining. Then he returned to nibbling the piece of meat. "That's the stuff . . . make yourself at home." Jack whispered the words softly, but the little head snapped around again and beady black eyes stared at him for a long time, with only the long whiskers twitching nervously. Then Bright Eyes picked up the piece of meat and darted out of sight. Jack relaxed again on the sleeping-bag. "But he'll be back. . . ."

The dying fire in the stove had let a chill come into the room. If he waited for Bright Eyes to come out, another piece of wood or two would have to be burned. The urge to crawl into the sleeping-bag was strong. But what was that sound? It was like sand scratching against the stove-pipe up above the roof. Could it be sleet? He got up and went to the door to look out at the weather. It had been snowing hard when he threw out the dishwater. But the weather had made a sudden change. "It can't be a chinook at this time of year!" He had to walk out to where the wet icy particles cut against his face, to be sure his eyes were not

deceiving him. A warm mass of air had moved in, probably from the coast. But chinooks came in the spring, not at the beginning of winter. "It can't last . . ." He still could hardly believe what he saw. "But if all this snow gets wet . . . and then it freezes hard . . . things are going to be tough around here. . . ." A little worried, although still confident the sleet would quickly turn back to snow, he went inside and was soon pleasantly tucked in the sleeping-bag.

It was more than a healthy appetite that had prompted the Pirate the previous day to go back to the place where he had suffered his first tragic insult in the jaws of a steel trap, and to feed to gluttony. His weather instinct had given warning that the wintry elements were about to go on a rampage, during which it might be extremely difficult to find a meal ; and a full stomach would be a big help towards passing the time inside the shelter of the den. There were others in the Quehatch who also sensed the warning. About the only one to whom the unusual change in the weather was to be a complete surprise, was the lone human occupant of the log cabin out in the centre of the mountain valley.

Some of the residents of the Quehatch had worked hard all through the day, harvesting

food and storing it in places where it would be accessible under the worst of conditions. The field mice and other small rodents busily gathered seeds, bits of bark and other vegetation to be carried into sheltered or underground storerooms. The squirrels added to their caches in the crotches of big trees. Around the artificial lake at the mouth of the Little Quehatch every member of the beaver colony, old and young, was energetically engaged in transporting tender-barked branches of birches and willows to be anchored on the bottom of the deep water which they had created and where this food supply could be reached when the surface was solidly frozen over.

Blackie and his family pack came down out of the upper canyon of the Little Quehatch when the bright golden glow was still well down on the white ramparts that towered above. The sun always passed quickly over the deep narrow abyss that cut back into the mountains from the main valley ; and the wintry shadows had an added chill. The family always kept the rabbits well cleaned out and in winter they had to go outside to be sure of a good meal. During the summer it wasn't so bad, with so many young sheep up on the grassy pastures among the glaciers and rocky peaks ; and there were a great number of nesting ground birds ;



which kept the big black wolf and his family in a state of fat contentment. In winter they generally had to work for their meals ; sometimes fight hard for them. Blackie liked this challenge for survival and he enjoyed teaching his offspring how to meet and master it with strength and stealth and cold determination. He had never bowed to the will or challenge of any other individual of his own kind, except one—and that was the grey mate who was always with him. She did not often display any evidence of disapproval or defiance to his wishes, except when the whelps were very young ; but he was always subservient to her slightest demand.

Fully half a mile above the nearest point where any of the beavers might be working, Blackie led the pack to the west side of the valley and increased the pace as they moved along as close to the perpendicular mountain wall as it was convenient to travel. They moved very quietly, with the three full-grown whelps crowding close behind Blackie, and the Old Lady following. When they reached a point opposite the head of the beaver pond, the big black swung down across the narrow valley, breaking into a lope that quickly increased to a run. The whelps crowded impatiently at his side, one of them breaking out

ahead. It was like a signal to attack and they all knew exactly what the immediate programme was. They darted among the snow-laden trees, skirting the clumps of brush and travelling as quietly as possible. Even when they got out into the willow thickets, they made very little sound ; and they were almost at the stream before they stopped. Here was a trail where the beavers had wallowed through the snow, trudging up the valley and dragging tree limbs back to the lake. Blackie and his three offspring rammed their noses into the trail, sniffing loudly and intently, while the Old Lady stood quietly watching them. But there were so many fresh tracks, going and coming, that it was impossible to tell for sure in which direction the last beaver had travelled. With only a brief delay, the whelps went dashing off along the trail which led farther into the thickets.

Blackie jumped down into the stream bed. The shallow creek was fringed on both sides with ice. Racing on he made a strenuous leap to clear the open space that ran in a ragged irregular channel down the centre, for the water would quickly freeze on the hair of his feet and legs. The ice broke with a sharp and resounding crack under the big black's weight, although he nimbly reached the opposite shore without hardly wetting a toe. The Old Lady

followed close behind in similar fashion. At almost the same moment there was the loud crack of a beaver tail slapped solidly on the surface of the lake a few hundred feet away. The warning was sounded ; but Blackie and his pack had effected their ambush and the warning would be too late for any unfortunate beaver that was up the valley.

Picking up another well-used path that led back into the thick stand of willows, Blackie and his mate rushed on. The scent was fresh and strong. With head up, ears and eyes alert, he plunged along the trail. Coming to a downed tree where several limbs had recently been cut off and dragged away, he stopped for a moment. Two paths went on from here. He sped off along one of these and the Old Lady followed the other.

Finally the big black came to the end of the trail. There was a freshly cut tree ; but only tracks and fresh scent in the snow. The little brown workman had come and gone. He stood stiffly, listening to find out if any of the others had enjoyed better luck. He did not stand long, however, but started walking slowly toward the creek. A slight snarl wrinkled the skin around his nose and his cold eyes flashed.

Coming to the tracks of the Old Lady, he followed them, but met her coming back.

Together they went on to the stream. The three whelps were standing on the opposite bank. All the spirit was gone from the youngsters, who seemed to expect some punishment for their failure. But Blackie just leaped across the open water and was soon leading the pack on toward the big valley.

As they came out on to the shore of the lake, another beaver tail slapped on the water. The young ones stopped to stare ; but Blackie went right on without so much as a glance in that direction. He growled deep down in his throat and wrinkled his nose a bit. This was not the first time he had failed to ambush his amiable neighbours.

The leader had already spotted several moose in the thickets beyond the opposite end of the beaver dam. His sharp eyes had immediately identified them from blotches of their black backs that showed through the screen of trees, above the solid wall of integrated logs, limbs and earth. Blackie seldom gave moose a second glance, except when the snow was so deep they could not move around very well, and the surface was solid enough to carry his own weight. There are not many natural weapons of defence more effective than the sharp front hoofs of an able moose, when he has the opportunity to strike with them. But there was nothing finer

than moose meat and its conquest was part of the training which Blackie gave all his youngsters. It was generally left until the last, after they had learned their other lessons and were not so likely to abandon good judgment during excitement, and suffer serious consequences. But the big black decided to go over and have a close look at the moose.

Henry had already added three new members to his family herd. It was as yet unnecessary for the moose to yard-up. The snow gave them but little difficulty until it was over three feet deep; but the grazing was good below the beaver dam; and two other cows with another calf had joined them. The big bull strutted proudly. It would not be long before his great antlers would drop off, and until he lost that crowning glory he was intent upon displaying every pompous prerogative of the undisputed master of the Quehatch Valley.

Not particularly concerned with any dangerous attack, the moose were scattered through the thicket when Blackie and his pack came upon them. The two gangling calves were off by themselves. The others stood lazily nibbling at twigs that provided no effort to reach, or methodically chewing their cuds. Only Henry showed any signs of real energy. He strode stiffly from one to another, with his head held high and

neck bulged out. Now and then he exhaled his breath with a snort.

The wolves moved so quietly and the moose were so oblivious to the possibility of danger that the pack was beside them before their presence was observed. Blackie stopped and the others moved up. They were so close to the calves there was a strong urge to make a flying rush upon them. It would have been quite easy ; but Blackie knew well that little could be accomplished before the others would rush to the defence and one strike by a front hoof could easily end the whole career of any member of his pack. He had hardly stopped, however, when the calves lurched into a frantic rush to reach the sides of their mothers.

The big bull reacted quite differently. The instant he saw the wolves he lunged at them with long rapid strides, swinging down his horns as he went. The charge was so sudden and fast that he almost caught Blackie on the upward sweep of the horns. The big wolf leaped aside with a sharp snarl. One of the whelps jumped forward, coughing a savage growl and snapping at the bull's head. Henry swung his horns so quickly that the bold young challenger was knocked into the snow. The wolves all scrambled in a hasty retreat ; while Henry stood snorting his defiance. The hair

bristled up all over Blackie's back and his eyes flashed angrily ; but he was much too wise to lead his family into a frontal attack. He turned and trotted slowly away ; and one by one the others followed.

The black leader's disposition was now in a bad state. The hair was still up on his back. Insult had been added to failure, and he never took either gracefully. He had a very good memory, and would remember to pay another visit to the big bull, when he had lost his antlers and the snow was very deep.

Once out in the main valley they swung down toward the west, to a section where only scattered birches rose over a large area of thick clumps of brush. This was always good rabbit country, where they were generally able to pick up a meal all around, in spite of the many briar patches in which the rabbits often found a safe retreat.

It was a sort of game they played. When a rabbit was located in the brush, one of the pack would plunge in to chase it out, while the others raced around with the hope of catching the unfortunate bunny as he raced across the open to another thick retreat. They were not always successful, particularly when briar patches were near.

The sun had gone down and the heavy snow

clouds had brought the dark grey of an early night into the valley when the wolf pack once again fell in line behind their black leader and moved on to find new hunting grounds.



## CHAPTER X

### MISFORTUNE STRIKES QUICKLY

A SURPRISE awaited Jack when he awoke the next morning. Sitting up in the sleeping-bag he was immediately conscious of the sleet still scratching against the top of the stove-pipe. The air in the cabin was moist and mild. As he listened, the icy particles could be heard occasionally dropping down into the stove. Slipping into his outer clothing and putting on his mukluks, he hurried outside to see what had happened to the weather. It was not a cheerful sight that greeted him. Murky low-hanging mist added a leaden gloom to the falling sleet. He could see little beyond the creek. The trees had dropped their attractive snowy decorations and stood bleak, bare and bent under a heavy coating of ice. The snow on the ground had not melted, but lay wet and soggy.

“ It can’t be. . . . ” He could hardly believe his eyes. His thoughts turned to the traps he had set. The only possibility that the Pirate had been caught was in the slight chance he had come that way before the snow stopped falling. “ With all that fresh human scent . . .

No . . . he's too smart for that." It was futile even to hope. He went back into the cabin to start the fire and get some breakfast.

The dry birch from behind the stove, which always flared into flame without encouragement, didn't want to burn at all; and the stove puffed smoke out into the room, as it never had done before. Jack sat on the edge of the bunk, waiting for the fire to get going and the water to boil. He thought about the weather; but was mostly concerned about the traps. He had always held a low opinion of trappers who left their sets for days without visiting them, because of bad weather or because they were too lazy to leave the cabin. Growing up amid the atmosphere and traditions of the trapping industry, the best of these had become part of his nature. There had never been any feeling that cruelty was concerned; it was a realistic feeling against the wasting of any precious fur. In the case of the Pirate, there was an added motive in taking advantage of every possible opportunity. The trip back to the traps would be a long and unpleasant one; and the chances of finding anything but bogged-down hopes was almost beyond serious consideration—but he decided to go. "When all this freezes . . ." but he refused to think about that.

Sloshing along the bank of the stream, there

was little to make him enthusiastic about the Quehatch Valley. He was soon soaking wet well above the knees and the falling sleet made his mackinaw coat heavy and uncomfortable. It was necessary to watch the ground ahead, for it was dangerously slippery underneath the soggy snow. He tried to whistle softly ; and to find something pleasant to think about. Occasionally he glanced at the creek. It was higher than it had been before and the muddy brown water swirled around the boulders and cut underneath the drab white snow on either side, like a spring freshet. He thought about the gold that lay underneath. " Maybe I'd do better trying to dig to bedrock. There must be some way to get down there." But he quickly returned his thoughts to the traps and the wise old wolverine they had been set to catch.

All the way up the creek, to the place where he left it, there was not a squirrel or a bird to be seen. Every living thing had apparently retired to shelter. " This is going to make things tough for a lot of the little folks who live around here."

Walking was more difficult going back through the timber toward the mountain. He slipped and slid as he sloshed along. " I've got to be careful."

A sharp look-out was kept ahead as he came closer to the place where the traps were set. It was not impossible that the Pirate had come along that way and made one fatal mis-step. After all, he was no miracle creature, and could be caught. But then a clear view opened up ahead. There stood the big dead spruce, towering gauntly against the drab mountainside, and all around the snow lay wet and lifeless.

Digging out the three traps, he hung them over his shoulder and started back to the cabin. The return trip seemed twice as long. Only the anticipation of getting into dry clothing and stretching out on the comfortable bunk kept his spirits from collapse.

The sleet continued through the rest of the day and became mixed with wet snow as night closed in. The next day brought more of the same, only the wind began to blow.

After breakfast Jack went out to chop wood, but soon came inside. It was so dark in the cabin that he had to keep a candle burning. He stood in the middle of the floor staring at the yellow flame. "At the rate I've been using them, there won't be enough candles to last until spring. I'll have to go to bed earlier." This brought the other supplies to mind. Would the coffee last? The sugar had disappeared with surprising rapidity. Would there

be enough rice and oatmeal? He had been eating a terrific amount. The possibility that he might run out of food became a frightening one. Never before had food seemed so important. "But I can always get meat . . . I'll have to eat more meat . . . and go easy on the other things."

Something else began to worry him. His trapping efforts had been a failure. "The little toe of a wolverine!" The words came sarcastically, as a personal denunciation. "Wouldn't I look fine, going back with only the little toe of a wolverine!" Getting a good catch of fur had been taken for granted. He had never considered himself a trapper, in the true sense of the word, and there was no grub-stake debt which must be paid with the skins he brought in; but he had a special family pride to be upheld. To go in with even a skimpy catch, was unthinkable; and no wolverine on earth would provide a sufficient excuse.

By afternoon Jack found himself walking restlessly back and forth in the cabin. It took only four steps to go from the bunk to the door; and the room shrunk smaller and smaller as the time dragged tediously by. He tried to find little chores to occupy the time; shaved, although he had planned to grow a beard; and washed some wool socks. But there was no

escape. His head began to buzz. It was as if something were gnawing at the nerves somewhere deep inside him.

He went to bed early that night. It was not just to save the candle. Sleep would be a welcome relief from the tense nervousness which confinement in the cabin had brought upon him. Maybe tomorrow would come quickly and the trapping could be begun. For the first time since coming into the valley, however, he was unable to go to sleep. He tried lying on one side, then the other ; counted sheep ; he stared about the blackness of the room—but sleep would not come. Almost before realizing it, he was deeply engrossed in thinking about the gold on the bottom of the Quehatch. He was not interested in trying to solve the problem of getting down through the jumble of boulders. Good mining engineers had said it was impossible. " But there must be some way to get down at it. . . ." The problem kept returning to his mind in spite of efforts to think of other things. " There must be some way . . . or maybe there is some place where there aren't any boulders. But would the gold be there ? " Then another question arose. " Maybe there isn't any gold down there at all . . . and it's just a fable . . . like the Indian belief in the ghosts that haunted the Quehatch Valley. . . . "

For three days the chinook poured down sleet and wet snow, without abating. During the imprisonment which it brought to Jack in the little cabin, he weighed and fought out numerous problems—some important and some not. Out of the jumble, however, he decided to launch upon an intense trapping campaign as soon as the weather changed and there was enough good snow. If necessary he would go up the valley, as far as the glacier and out of the range of the Pirate, and set traps for marten and fox. There would probably be other wolverine up there, too, but they might not be as difficult as the Pirate.

At the end of the fourth night, the moment he sat up in the sleeping-bag to look out, he knew the weather had changed. The air in the cabin was cold, dry and sharp, and there was a steel blue light in the window. Without taking time to slip on his shirt or pants, he darted across the little room to open the door. It was clear outside ; and one glance told him that everything was frozen solid as bedrock.

When he went out to the creek for water it was necessary to chop a hole in the ice. But once again the whole sky was immaculate blue and the big mountains rose majestically all around, heavily heaped with pure white. It was as if he had been released from an

underground cave. But down below the beauty of clear sky and the panorama of magnificent mountain peaks, every inch of the valley was covered with solidly frozen wet snow. He had difficulty walking from the cabin door to the edge of the stream. But maybe it was just the mukluks he wore. They were made for walking on snow, not ice. Travelling would be difficult and dangerous, too. It was far from good trapping conditions—the poorest possible, in fact. “But every animal that lives in this valley is going to be mighty hungry . . .” he argued, “and they’ll have a tough time finding food. It should be easy to get marten. Yes, I can build ‘cubbies . . . and they’ll walk right into a trap . . . even with the trap in plain sight.”

During breakfast he considered going to the beaver pond. It would be simple to make water sets over there. But the fact that beaver pelts, unlike the other fur bearers’, are much better in the spring, caused him to pass that possibility by. He would go far up the valley and build cubbies for marten. - He might also make some sets for fox.

The dishes were left to be washed when he returned. He had been cooped up in the little cabin too long; he wanted to have plenty of time to pick good spots and make the sets;



the days were awfully short ; and, anyhow, a few dirty dishes were quite unimportant.

One of the quarters of moose meat had to be taken down out of the tree, to trim off enough pieces for bait. It was frozen hard as wood. There wasn't very much meat left on the bone, either. But it would be easy to get another moose when the present supply ran out.

Finally, well loaded down with a full bag of traps, wire, belt axe, binoculars, and the other necessities, he was on his way up the valley. He wore his fur dog-musher's cap ; the mukluks had been changed for rubber bottomed shoe-pacs, which were not nearly as warm and didn't make travelling on the frozen snow a great deal easier. His feet persisted in slipping in spite of the rough surface. The ground was level along the bank of the stream and was normally good walking, so long as the scattered boulders could be avoided. Travelling was a lot slower than he had expected ; for he had to be careful.

An uncomfortable feeling had come over him—that he should wait until there was fresh snow. It increased the farther he walked. But this was never as strong as the satisfying relief of getting started upon the serious purpose of the trip into the Quehatch. The trapping was at last about to begin.

He had decided not to go all the way to the

glacier, where the timber thinned out on both sides of the valley. It was better marten country where the big timber stretched across the whole Quehatch. "I'll go up as far as it looks good . . ." he said to himself, "and work back down the valley. The other side of the creek might be better." The whole upper end would not take a great deal of time to trap out. That depended of course on how successful he was. Most fur bearers showed the least wariness on their first experience with a trapper's set, but they generally got smart very quickly. "I won't waste too much time up here . . ." He knew there were a limited number of wild inhabitants in this closed-in area; not more of each variety than the natural food supply would conveniently support. This gave him an advantage, however, because they were limited in the range of territory over which they might travel. Farther down the valley, below the cabin, there was enough country to keep him busy throughout the winter.

Jack stopped when he came to where the creek bed spread into the rocky plain below the glacier. His eyes moved out over the clumps of brush and tall grass. He knew there were plenty of rabbits and field mice out there. "Mighty good hunting-ground for marten." Then his gaze shifted to the trees that thickly

covered the valley back to the mountain. "If there was only a little snow . . . so I could tell where the game is travelling." Everywhere he looked he found only a bleak and deserted wilderness. But there might be more than one fine marten slyly watching him at that very moment, as it lay on a branch high up in one of the spruce, or with one eye peering out of a cosy "nest" in a hole in one of the tall, dead trees. All the way up the valley he had kept a sharp look-out, realizing full well the slight chance of catching a glimpse of one of the beautiful but wary creatures.

"There *must* be marten here. . . ." There were plenty of rabbits and field mice out in the open country, pine squirrels and grouse in the timber, and ptarmigan too. Marten were prolific and hardy, raising families of as many as six nearly every spring; and no one had trapped up here for several years. "It's plenty far enough away from the cabin. . . ." He knew that marten were extremely suspicious of the habitations and presence of human beings. They sometimes moved entirely out of the country in which a cabin is built. If there were any in the Quehatch Valley they certainly should be around here; and he was pretty sure to find out from the first night or two that the traps were set, for they were easy to catch.

As his gaze wandered about, he had noticed a couple of good places. He went to one of these. It was an aged spruce, with a heavy trunk on which the lower limbs were dead, although the green boughs above spread out like a roof. There was a carpet of brown spruce needles underneath, where neither snow nor sleet had fallen. It was an ideal place to build a cubby. He dropped the bag of traps and unbuckled the hand axe from his belt. He hacked out of the way two dead limbs so he could get to the base of the tree.

A short distance farther on was a thicket, where he chopped down several saplings and cut them into stakes about two feet long. When he had about twenty he carried them back and began driving them into the ground to form a small pen, using the tree-trunk as the back end. The stakes were placed an inch or so apart and were pounded down enough to be solid. The top ends were about level with one another, so it would be easy to put a roof on the pen. The two lines of stakes converged to an open end, wide enough for a trap to be placed in the entrance and a marten could not easily step on either side of it. With the hatchet he smoothed out a place, making a slight depression, where he set one of the small traps, without any attempt to cover it. There he dropped

several pieces of meat inside the little pen, put on a roof of sticks and boughs and weighted it down with a flat stone. "That's a good cubby." He eyed it critically before picking up his things and moving farther back into the woods to find another location to make a set.

It did not take long to build three of the little pens, each with a trap set and staked at the entrance. Then he decided to cross to the other side of the valley. He had a strong desire to make some fox sets ; but without soft snow to hide the traps it would be a waste of time ; so he turned his attention entirely to building cubbies for marten.

The Quehatch creek broke up into several small streams that ran down through the rocky plane from the glacier, making it easy to cross, although every boulder that might be used as a stepping stone was dangerously capped with ice.

While going across the open area in the centre of the valley, he saw several moose near the upper end of the timber on the opposite side. The binoculars were put on them. Two looked like the same ones that had been with the young bull he had taken for meat. He stopped only long enough to take a good look at them. The travelling was dangerously slippery among the boulders and he had no time to waste. But he

was getting more accustomed to travelling on the icy surface.

The territory below, on the south side of the creek, was entirely new to Jack. There was some unusually heavy timber a short distance in from the open area. This should be ideal marten country and he headed in that direction. He also noticed a couple of rocky canyons cutting into the south wall of the mountains, which he would like to have a look into.

Heading down into the heavy timber he was soon among some of the biggest trees he had seen in the valley. In places it was almost like the cedar swamps of the coastal regions. There were a good many squirrels and he saw several grouse. "If there aren't marten around here, there's none in the Quehatch." More enthusiastic than at any time before, he started building more cubbies. He blazed a trail as he went along, occasionally slashing a clean cut on the side of a tree with the hand axe, to lead the way from one set to the next.

The sun was almost down to the white peaks and the cold shadows had begun to darken by the time he reached the far side of the valley. The time had passed rapidly and almost without notice ; and he suddenly realized it was important to start back, to get home before dark. He had come a long way. But maybe there

would be time to build just one more cubby. It wasn't very far to one of the rocky canyons which had attracted his attention. He could have a quick look in there and then cut across the valley in a straight line for the cabin.

The farther he explored the Quehatch the more fascinating it became. He was beginning to understand why the valley was held in such a colourful opinion by the Indians and the back-country white men, and why it was the home of so many wild creatures. With all its present frozen and cruel aspects, it was a wonderfully wild retreat in the mountain wilderness.

The canyon was like a big grotto in the rocky side of the mountain. There was evidently a large spring at the back of it, for a stream of crystal clear water ran out through the thick growth of trees that covered the comparatively small area. One thing about this fascinating place, which he quickly noticed, effected quite a change in his enthusiasm. It was the unmistakable smell of wolverine. He had almost forgotten there was such a thing. There was no doubt about it; one of them had a den in here; and he had unpleasant visions of having all his cubbies in the big timber robbed of everything that was caught. He gazed up through the tree-tops and the rocky cliffs at the evening sky. Even if he started home right

now, it would be dark before he reached the cabin. He was hungry and tired. But to try to catch the abominable resident of this fascinating little canyon now became the most important problem of all. "I can't go back without trying . . ." He began looking about for some place to begin. No time could be lost. If there was only some fresh snow. Where was the trail it used, going out and coming back? Jack's eyes searched for some natural passageway, or where one could be made to look natural. Maybe there was a better place back by the side wall of the canyon. There was still enough meat to bait at least one set; and fortunately he had brought along a couple of the heavy traps.

He dropped the trap bag and took off his heavy mackinaw coat. He started for the side of the canyon, keeping his eyes on the ground in search for some sign of a trail. There was a solid mass of trees and under-brush wedged tightly against the cliff, and it extended unbroken as far as he could see. "I'll try the other side . . ." He hurried back across the canyon.

Stepping over a moss- and ice-covered tree-trunk, the rubber heel of the shoe-pac on his right foot slipped and he went down very hard. He had fallen several times during the day; but this time the sharp pain which shot through



his ankle caused him to hesitate before scrambling on to his feet. "I'll have to be more careful. . . ." He rolled over and started to get up. The ankle gave way under his weight and he went down heavily again. A sickening feeling flashed through his whole body. Something serious had happened. Sitting up he took the injured foot in his hands ; but quickly straightened out his whole leg and let it lie as easily as possible. The pain made him grit his teeth. He sat motionless, trying to comprehend what had happened. Again he tried to get up. It was no use. He lifted himself up, so as to sit on the log. He tried to turn his foot, and to move his toes. A cold sweat broke out on his face and spread over his whole body. The ankle was badly sprained, or broken.

## CHAPTER XI

### WHEN THE COLD IS CRUEL

ONE careless step had brought Jack face to face with calamity. In the first fleeting moments he was rather confused as he tried to make a realistic appraisal of his predicament. The weird stories of the Quehatch came back like ghosts to haunt him. Was the same thing happening to him? It had been such a little thing—just stepping over a fallen log—but the result was as final as though a mountain had suddenly risen up to block his return to the cabin. Even if he were able to accomplish that seemingly impossible trip, he would not be able to get away from the injury. It brought on a feeling of utter helplessness.

“I’ll have to build a fire . . .” Several times he said this to himself, “and gather enough wood to last through the night.” He knew how cruel the cold could be; and just to sit and think, might mean that morning would never come. He stared down at the injured foot, propped at an awkward angle on the frozen snow. It reminded him of the Pirate and the little toe that was in the pocket of

the mackinaw coat lying twenty steps away. "He made one careless step, too. It was his left foot . . . but it didn't stop him. It mustn't stop me." Just to think about hobbling around to gather wood for a fire was painful. There wasn't a lot of dead wood in sight ; and what there was, was heavily coated with ice. What should be done about the foot ? It would soon begin to swell. Should the boot be taken off ? Would it be possible at all to walk far enough to collect wood ? He tried to stand up ; but it was like having the leg knocked out from under him ; and he dropped heavily back on to the log. "I *must* build a fire." Where would be the best place ? "Near a wall of the canyon . . . where the heat will be reflected." If necessary, he might crawl on hands and knees. "If I only had a flashlight." The darkness would soon come. "It would come very quickly." "There's too much brush on this side . . . but maybe the other side will be better." He looked up at the sky, through the tops of the tall trees and the high rocky cliff. It looked awfully cold up there, and it was getting colder in the canyon. Never before had the coming of darkness frightened him.

Standing upright, he puffed like a bull walrus when it comes up to the surface of the sea, then he ground his teeth together, but he did

not fall down again. There was a sickening feeling in his stomach, and a cold perspiration covered his face, his hands and all his body. In one quick sweep he searched for a sapling, out of which to cut some sort of crutch. He made one step, struggling to keep the knee from giving way under his weight, and impulsively wiped the sweat out of his eyes. The sickening feeling in his stomach had rushed to his head, with a dizziness that made him afraid to move any farther ; but he refused to sit down.

Very slowly he made his way to the mackinaw coat. First he took the traps out of the bag, and counted the pieces of moose meat that were left. They were mighty sorry looking, for the best had been put in the cubbies ; but these were now very precious. Carrying the coat, he moved on toward the west wall of the canyon. It was very slow travelling. The thought occurred to him that when an animal has its foot caught in a steel trap, the foot becomes so numb that the pain is apparently overcome—that's why they often chew off the foot and get away. There was a vague hope that a similar relief might come to him. Or is it because animals can endure pain better than humans ? " But I *must* build a fire ! "

It was very discouraging, until he found the skeleton of a big spruce which had fallen in a

thicket alongside the cliff. The root and the limbs held it a little off the ground. By clearing away the brush he might build a fire underneath and set the whole tree on fire. It could burn throughout the night. The idea was worth trying. He lay down the coat and slipped the small axe out of its holster on his belt ; he began chopping the brush between the tree and the rock wall. It was easier to work on his hands and knees ; and he cut as close to the frozen snow as he could.

Darkness filled the canyon by the time he had a fire burning. He had continued to gather additional branches as long as it was possible to see, and he had also cut enough green boughs to cover the space where the brush had been chopped away. While the fire burned, he arranged the green boughs into a mattress on which to lie. Then he dropped down and lay staring blankly up into the blackness of the night. Through the tree-tops he could see a few stars. They seemed very close ; or were the tree-tops far away ? The fire crackled and flared, sending sparks and bold flashes of light up the craggy wall of the canyon. Already the warmth was beginning to reflect back ; and from somewhere he heard the dripping of melting ice. The warmth was comforting. But would the flare of the fire die down ? He hoped

the tree-trunk would continue to blaze when the pile of kindling turned to ashes. There was also the possibility that the fire might go beyond control and spread to the whole woods. It might sweep out into the valley ; even destroy the cabin. Such things did happen—too frequently.

“ I’d better take a look at the foot . . . ” He was breathing heavily, although the warm fire had calmed his nerves. “ I can take off my undershirt to wrap around it . . . and use the trap bag for a covering.” If he waited much longer, the ankle would be so swollen the boot would have to be cut off. It was already uncomfortably tight. Or would it be still better to leave the boot on to give the ankle support and make travelling easier ? “ If I start in the morning as soon as it’s light enough to travel . . . can I possibly make it back to the cabin ? Even if it takes two days . . . ” The little cabin had become a wonderful place, but very very far away.

Sitting up, he felt the ankle with his fingers, trying to find where the pain was the worst. It seemed to be the bone, on the outside, although he wasn’t entirely sure. He wriggled his foot, and then his toes, trying to determine whether the bone was broken or it was just a sprain. Without thinking, he began unlacing

the boot. The leather thong was entirely removed ; but the leather was stiff from the cold. Edging closer to the fire he pushed out the foot to let the heat soften the leather. The warmth was soothing, and he lay back on the boughs for a little while. " Why did this happen to me ? "

Then he tried to get off the shoe-pac. Two or three times he stopped and was tempted to abandon the effort ; but finally the foot slipped out. This gave relief. Carefully he pulled off the two woollen socks. The ankle was already badly swollen. He held it gently between both his hands and closed his eyes tightly. " If I could only wake up and find this was all a bad nightmare. . . . "

The fire was now burning so hard that he had to move a little farther away. The tree-trunk was blazing, and the light spread far up the cliff and made dancing silhouettes of the trees all around. Every animal for miles around would be aware of the fire. They are all afraid of fire. Right now some of them were probably hurrying to a safe distance. It might chase every marten out of this part of the valley. But marten and all the other wild inhabitants of the Quehatch had now become of little importance.

It was not easy to get the socks back on.

But the fire was burning well and he would not have to take off his undershirt to wrap his ankle—not yet, anyhow. He edged over to the trap bag, took out the pieces of moose meat, one by one, and carefully laid them on a spruce bough at the edge of his bed ; he then slipped his foot inside the bag. He looked at the pieces of meat. They seemed very small, but extremely important. “ I’ll not eat them now . . . not until morning.” The leather shoe-lace was wrapped around the trap bag, to make it fit the foot more snugly and to hold the covering in place. He made a pillow of the boughs and laid his leg on it, so the foot would not rest on anything at all. Buttoning the mackinaw coat up to the collar and pulling down the flaps of his fur cap, he lay back and tried to relax. He might even get some sleep.

Down along the north edge of the main valley, a large wolverine walked leisurely through the first black shades of night. He followed a familiar route, over which he had travelled a hundred times before. He knew every tree, rock and clump of brush, every step along the way. He grumbled a bit at the roughness of the frozen snow and limped just a little, favouring the left front foot. There was more than just the uncomfortable walking that caused



the grumbling, for he was hungry again and the weather had spoiled his hunting.

The Pirate was close to the old dead spruce, that stood alone at the foot of the rock slide, before he stopped. His stubby nose was thrust out, as it so often was. There was something new in the air. It was the faint smell of moose meat, from the pieces that Jack had put there before the snow had turned to slush. The three days of wet weather had washed out the human scent ; but the small pieces of meat, frozen into the surface, still sent out their faint aroma. Cautious, but quite sure of himself, the Pirate moved forward, step by step, and was soon digging out the titbits, one by one. It wasn't much of a meal for a hungry wolverine and did little more than stir his healthy appetite for more. To acquire food that he didn't have to work for was all to his liking—and this was very good food. He knew of two other places where there was more just like it. More than he could possibly eat hung in a tree beside the cabin. The fact that he had failed to get to it the first time still annoyed him ; and, anyhow, he harboured a bitter feeling toward the intruder in his valley who occupied the cabin. There were several good reasons why he should make another attempt to get that meat.

Only the stars blinked in the black abyss of

heaven, and even the cold white peaks were all but lost in the darkness. It was the kind of night he liked, and his courage ran high.

He stopped when the cabin showed up dimly through the trees. It lay silent in the darkness. There was no smell of smoke, no human scent. As he crept closer, instinct told him the place was deserted. Proceeding with caution, he circled around the log hut, sniffing at each step. He picked up the tracks where Jack had left to go up the valley. A long time was spent examining the faint scent that lingered on the frozen snow. He moved back and forth, until he was quite sure, before moving on.

Going to where the meat was hung, every possible means of getting up the tree was tried and then tried again. At length, he turned his attention to the log hut. By now convinced that the place was deserted, he moved closer and closer, wrinkling his whole face in a defiant snarl as he came round the corner and stopped in view of the door. Here he stood motionless, sniffing. Then he went on, until his nose could be pushed out close to the narrow crack at the bottom of the door. From inside came tempting odours of unwashed dishes, fresh bacon, and other things. He backed away, suspiciously, but returned to sniff some more. The human

scent was stale ; and now he was sure the hated occupant was not there.

He pushed at the door, very cautiously at first. Then his courage increased, and he pushed a little harder. It moved open an inch or two. The Pirate backed away again, half inclined to abandon the bold intrusion. But he was soon back, and putting more strength into the effort, the door swung open. For some moments he stood staring and sniffing—then he went inside.

For Jack, there was neither sleep nor relaxation. The fire died down, as he had feared it would, almost as quickly as it had flared up to light the canyon wall and the big trees that reached up so high into the cold darkness. The dead limbs which he had gathered under difficult circumstances and put underneath the fallen giant of the forest, had all burned away and the flame just played listlessly around the big log. He moved closer, and piece by piece used the reserve of branches to keep the blaze going. There was certainly not enough to keep this up until daylight. Why didn't the fallen tree burn better ? Maybe it had been dead too long. Already the cold was sneaking in ; and while the mackinaw coat hung heavily on his shoulders, as he sat staring helplessly at the lifeless blaze, his back had begun to chill.

The little log home on the bank of the Quehatch was constantly in his thoughts—the sleeping-bag, stove, and food. “I should have washed the dishes and straightened up the place. . . .” He suddenly remembered that one of the other unfortunate residents had left dirty dishes on the table, and never got back to wash them. “Why didn’t I fasten the hook on the door, to keep it closed?” He had never bothered to fasten the hook, when he left the cabin, but he thought of it now. Could anything get inside to damage his precious supplies? Only a wolverine . . . but the Pirate would never have the courage to go inside. But would he? Why didn’t the door swing *out* instead of *in*? The big snows . . . if it swung out, it couldn’t be pushed open, with so much snow piled against it . . . that’s why the door swings in. He hadn’t thought of that before. But it was easier for intruders to get in; unless one fastened the hook. This was unimportant, right now. The main thing was to get back to the cabin. “I must get back . . . somehow. . . .”

To go straight across the valley to the cabin was the shortest route. What sort of country lay in between? It was mostly timbered. He wished he knew more about it. To cross any deep ravines, or push through thickets might

be impossible. And the creeks. How would he cross them? If the unprotected foot got wet it would freeze very quickly. Maybe the shoe-pac should have been left on. The distance was longer to return the way he had come, but it could be a lot easier. "Does it make very much difference which way I try to go?" He was shivering now.

He held his wrist-watch toward the fire to see what time it was. "Not yet ten o'clock. . . ." That might not be right, for the watch had run down a couple of times and had been set by guess. The time of day had lost its importance since coming into the Quehatch; but it was very important now. "It won't be light enough to travel before about seven-thirty, or maybe eight." That would be a long time to wait; and the pile of wood appeared sadly inadequate to keep away the freezing cold for so long a time. Why didn't the big log blaze better?

The top of the dead tree had burned away and dropped on to the wet ground where the snow and ice had melted. Slowly and weakly the fire worked along the trunk toward the upturned roots. Jack moved his bed of green boughs to keep opposite the centre of the blaze and begrudgingly kept feeding it with the dead limbs he had gathered. It became necessary

to chop away more brush, as he moved along. The ankle was by now so stiff he could hardly move it back and forth, but the pain was not so bad.

The hours dragged by. He tried to keep from looking at the watch, for it always seemed that more time had passed than was actually true. There were times, however, when the log burned well ; and its warmth revived his courage for a while.

Twelve o'clock . . . four . . . five . . . six o'clock. He cooked the pieces of moose meat, one by one, putting them on the end of a stick and holding them close to the fire. The pieces were burned crisply on the outside, before they were eaten, because he had no salt. It was not much of a meal, but it made him feel better.

Then he began counting the minutes and staring out into the darkness in search of the first faint sign of approaching daylight. He tried to stand up, to see if it was going to be possible to walk. With the aid of a crude crutch, he was sure he could travel. It would be slow ; and a crutch would slip on the icy surface ; but he would be careful. Avoiding another mishap, he might make the cabin, without having to spend another awful night outside.

There were some small birch trees just outside the canyon. He believed they could be found

in the lingering darkness and he would try to have a crutch chopped out by the time it would be light enough to go on. The fire would burn itself out. He was glad of that. If the foot got too cold, he would use his undershirt to wrap around it ; but maybe the exertion of travelling would keep him warm.

Putting the discarded shoe-pac into the compartment in the back of his mackinaw, he got on to his feet. It was not going to be as easy to walk as he had hoped ; but gritting his teeth, he started on his way with a desperate determination. The first few steps were almost unbearable.

Away from the light of the fire, his eyes soon became more accustomed to the darkness ; and by the time he found the birches it was possible to pick out a small tree suitable for an improvised crutch. It helped, although it took a little while to get used to it and there was always the danger of it slipping every time his weight was put on it.

Two of the cubbies which had been built at the far end of the stand of big timber were on his way. If he could find them without wasting any time, he would spring the traps and pick up the pieces of meat that had been left as bait. It could taste mighty good, if another night had to be spent in the open.

By the time the sky was pale overhead and daylight was spreading down through the trees, Jack had pretty well mastered using a crotched section of a sapling for a crutch and was moving along with steady persistence. He missed the first of the cubbies he had hoped to visit. As he was looking around for the one near the edge of the woods, his ears caught a sound that brought a sudden spark of interest. It was the rattling of a trap chain. The sound was straight ahead and he pushed on, almost forgetting the pain of each step. Soon he was able to see the cubby . . . and a fine big marten.

In a few moments the beautiful creature lay limply in his hands. It was richly furred ; a glossy dark brown ; and had a fine tail, almost like that of a fox. There was hardly a spot of yellow on the skin. Jack's eyes sparkled as he appraised the fur. It was more than two feet in length. The pelt could be removed in a few minutes, although he decided to take the whole animal along, instead of the pieces of bait that remained. Slipping the marten into the back of his coat, along with the shoe-pac, he glanced at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. There was a strong urge to go back and look at the other traps. " It's a shame to leave them. . . ." Considering the distance that still lay ahead and the time that had



already been spent on the way, it was doubtful if the cabin could be reached by dark. "I've got to get there. Anything but another night like the last one." A little reluctantly he went hobbling awkwardly on his way.

Travelling was more difficult when he got out in the open, because of the many boulders; and getting over the open water in the branches of the stream, without wetting the unprotected foot, took more time than expected. Finally, however, he was moving more rapidly on the level ground along the west bank of the Quehatch.

The sun had gone down and the shadows of another night were settling in the valley when Jack finally came within sight of the cabin. It was such a joyous sight that he didn't know whether to shout or cry. He was very weary. His right leg ached far above the knee; his toes were so numb he was afraid they might be frost-bitten; and the forked arm rest of the crude crutch had rubbed a raw place under his arm, which added to his discomfort. But soon he would have a good fire burning, hot coffee boiling, a big supper, and then the wonderful luxury of the sleeping-bag. It had been a real ordeal; but he had come through. He hurried to finish the last short bit. Then he suddenly stopped. A startled look came over his face

and an unpleasant premonition sent a chill through his whole body. The cabin door was open. He had a feeling that something had been inside, and that all was not well.

## CHAPTER XII

### A NEW CHANCE

As Jack came to the open door of the cabin, he caught the smell of wolverine before he was able to look inside. The room was dark ; but he could see things scattered about on the floor. There was also the odour of fresh, uncooked coffee. The truth came to him. A wolverine had got in and had turned the place into a shambles. "*The Pirate!*" he whispered.

Before a match could be lighted, he saw the table had been upset. The small flame showed his precious sugar strewn about like snow on the dirt floor, and there were rice and beans mixed in. He moved the match about in search of the candle that had been on the table ; and soon identified it, chewed into bits. "The candles are in the big knapsack. . . ." He turned to the pack behind the door and saw it ripped open with the contents scattered about. Moving closer he noticed more bits of chewed candle. Nowhere could he find a piece large enough to use as a light. He turned quickly to look at the sleeping-bag ; but it appeared untouched.

Unsteadily, and with a sickening feeling, he picked his way through the rubble and sat down on the bunk. The makeshift crutch slipped to the floor and the match went out. He sat quietly in the darkness, staring out through the open doorway. Another insignificant mistake had become tragically important. That one careless step over a fallen log had begun it all ; and now, neglecting to fasten the small hook on the cabin door had brought its own sad misfortune. He breathed heavily and the smell of wolverine was bitter to him. One hand reached out until it found the heavy blanket which lined the sleeping-bag and his fingers closed tightly upon it. He could at least be warm through the night. He did not have the energy to cross the room and close the door. Anyhow, the fresh air would help to clean out the unpleasant smell. Slowly the mackinaw was unbuttoned and slipped off, to be dropped on the floor with the other things. "The marten will be all right" . . . I'll skin it tomorrow." Everything could wait until tomorrow ; even his hunger.

When he got the trap bag and the socks off his foot he lit another match. The foot did not look good. But there was nothing he could do about it. He blew out the match and continued removing his outer clothing. Getting

into the sleeping-bag was not easy. The blanket lining was cold and he shivered, but he knew it would soon be warm. Finally stretched out, he heaved a big sigh of relief. This was the end of the hardest trail he had ever travelled and it was a wonderful place to be. Pulling his head down inside, he was soon asleep. It was a heavy, nightmarish sleep ; but he was comfortably warm at last.

When he woke in the morning, he was reluctant to stick his head out and look at the havoc. He knew that daylight was streaming in through the open door and that the room was icy cold. It was so luxuriously warm in the sleeping-bag. So long as he lay still there were no pains, except the emptiness in his stomach. One by one he recalled the fleeting glimpses he had got by match-light. Was there anything at all that was left in usable condition ? How could he survive without food ? Could he be sure it was the Pirate who had done all this ?

Sitting up, he reached for his heavy shirt and slipped it over his head. Even his arms and back were lame. One glance out through the doorway showed sunlight sparkling across the frozen front yard and the rocky stream bed beyond. His eyes turned to the bare shelf where most of the supplies had been put, and then moved slowly among the things that

cluttered the floor. His heart gave one extra thump at the sight of a full sack of oatmeal lying intact under the stove ; and it became evident that all the canned stuff, including the unopened coffee, was undamaged. But the rest made a sad sight.

Stiffly he pulled his body out of the sleeping-bag. His left leg was almost as lame as the injured one. The bad foot was swollen, stiff and discoloured ; but it did not worry him as much as it had. Maybe it was the other problems to be met, or the feeling of security which came from being in the cabin. He wasted no time in getting dressed, for it was as cold inside as outdoors. He wrapped his foot in a new undershirt. Then with the aid of his makeshift crutch he hobbled across the room to close the door and get the fire started. There was enough water in the pail so he did not have to go out to the creek.

By the time a mug of hot coffee was ready to tide him over until the oatmeal was cooked, the cabin had begun to get warm ; all the salvaged supplies had been put back on the shelf ; and an estimate of the destruction had been made. Maybe he could sweep up the rice and beans, and separate them from the dirt ; but there would be no more sugar, flour, butter, bacon, candles. . . . " He sure did go for those

candles. . . .” Jack could not resist a feeble chuckle. “Just chewed ‘em to pieces. Maybe I should use candles for bait.” There were more important things than candles, which he was going to have to do without. “But I can get along on just meat, if I have to.”

When the oatmeal was cooked, he put some water on the stove to heat in the old gold pan that was used to wash the dishes. It was as much a permanent fixture of the cabin as the stove and served for making bread, washing clothes and many other purposes. This time, however, Jack used it to give his foot a good hot soaking. Afterward, he cut a long narrow strip from the edge of his spare blanket and wrapped it tightly around the foot and ankle.

It took several hours to get the place straightened up. The marten had to be skinned and the pelt put on a stretcher. Then he lay down to rest.

“If I only had a wireless outfit . . . like the trading posts far back in the country use . . . I could have Dad send in some supplies by a dog team . . . or dropped by a bush pilot in a plane.” As the thought ran through his mind, he was at the same time a little glad that such a means of calling for help was not so easily available. The temptation to abandon the Quehatch might be too strong to resist. He

couldn't do that. He would never forgive himself. He was confident the ankle would mend ; and while the prospects of running out of food and of being confined in the cabin were discouraging, he still had some unfinished business to attend to, before he left.

Reconciled as he was to the situation, the first few days were the worst. A new crutch was made and the arm rest well padded with spare socks. He watched the foot as a mother guards her young, although he tried to keep his thoughts on other things.

He gathered up all the bits of candle, melted them and poured them back into forms made of paper from the cans on his shelf. They were rather lop-sided candles and burned down one side—but they were better than nothing. Most of one day was spent in making birch frames for the two photographs, which he hung over the bunk where they could be seen more easily. He also made a calendar, by smoothing the log above the window and drawing on it with the burned end of a stick. As near as he was able to figure, it was the fifteenth of November. Just what day of the week it came on, was even less certain ; but such details wouldn't make the oatmeal last any longer or bring winter to an end any sooner.

Each evening he shared a few pieces of the



moose meat with Bright Eyes. That had become a daily obligation, although the scraps were trimmed with increasing thrift. He didn't see a great deal of his little boarder, but every morning all the titbits had disappeared. The cultivation of this friendship had become handicapped by Jack having to go to bed early every evening. On very special occasions, however, one of the home-made candles was lighted until Bright Eyes came to dinner. He did not dash away now when Jack spoke softly to him; he would come out into the middle of the floor, when the serving of meat was particularly tempting. But he still stayed quite aloof. "He knows I won't hurt him . . ." Jack thought as he lay on the bunk watching him nibble a piece of meat; "but he's just too much of a little savage to break down and be friendly."

Morning after morning the days were checked off on the home-made calendar above the window. Each day he soaked his foot in hot water, kept it tightly bound, and tried to walk a little without the crutch. He also worried about the traps that had been left up the valley, especially the ones that were set and baited. "Probably every one of them has caught something by now . . . and what a pity to have that fur wasted."

Every day he thought about the Pirate. Time and again he planned ways and means by which the wolverine might be caught. That would be the first project, as soon as he was able to travel again. It seemed he would never get down to the serious work of trapping.

He used the crutch less and less, and finally discarded it, although he limped badly and stayed off his feet as much as possible. In spite of getting up late and going to bed early, keeping the fire going all day rapidly depleted the supply of cut wood. He ate only two meals a day ; but a straight diet of meat was causing the moose quarters to disappear a lot more rapidly than he liked. For extra special occasions, such as Sunday dinner, he now enjoyed a feast consisting of a small portion of rice and maybe an extra cup of coffee ; and once in a while he had oatmeal for breakfast. At other times it was meat, meat, meat. He fried it, roasted it and boiled it. He got sick of it. The time came when he felt he could never eat another meal of the stuff. But he did ; and then it became tolerable once more—like daily bread.

It began to snow again, quietly ; the ground became covered very quickly and the valley took on its wonderful white appearance . . . "like a great stage all dressed in ermine." It

piled up deeper and deeper. Jack loved the woods and the mountains when the snows of winter were upon them. It was grand trapping weather, too ; and this increased his impatience to get out, and about the things he had come to do. " My ankle's pretty good, now . . . " he argued. " If I'm careful, I think it'll be all right . . . and I've just got to get a new supply of meat."

Going slowly down to the creek<sup>o</sup> for water as daylight was just beginning to brighten the soft grey of falling snow, he decided to try out the snowshoes as soon as he had some breakfast. He was not sure how the ankle would act when called upon to drag along a snowshoe. The snow was deeper than it had been before, although it still had not settled enough to give a good body for travelling. It would come through the webbing and pile up on top ; but he could take along a stick to knock it free every couple of steps. Glancing up at the top of the stove-pipe he watched the grey plume of smoke and saw that the drift of the air was down the valley. " Yes, I'll do it," he said to himself in a determined way. " I'll try it, up the valley . . . and take the rifle along."

Wrapping his foot tightly, he put on two pairs of socks and the knee-long lumberman's

socks over them, and then the mukluks. It felt fine, as he walked outside and took down the snowshoes.

The first few steps brought doubts ; but he gained courage, and the farther he walked the more confident he became. The snow didn't pile up as badly as he had feared ; and he was out of sight of the cabin almost before he realized it. " I'll find out just how much the ankle can stand. . . ." There was also the hope he might be able to travel far enough to pick up some tracks—or maybe even get up to where the nearest of the traps had been set. " But I must be careful. I might not be so lucky, next time."

Only once did he find where game had crossed. It looked like lynx, although so much snow had fallen on the tracks it was difficult to say. He was about to turn back when something showed up ahead. More than one bold trail crossed the creek ; they were fresh ; and it looked like moose. Hurrying on he was soon where four cows or young bulls and one calf had passed within a short time before. " Those tracks aren't more than an hour or so old. . . ." Jack's eyes followed them into the thick timber. They were heading diagonally toward the mountain, and might now be standing a short distance inside the screen of snow-covered trees. The

possibility of getting game<sup>7</sup>so close to home was more than he had hoped for.

"They're going into 'the wind. . . ." He tried to figure out why and where they might be going. "Could be they've been disturbed. Only wolves would do that. More likely they're just travelling . . . gone into the heavy timber to spend the day . . . or headed for some feeding place they know about."

There was a temptation to follow the tracks, but Jack knew better than that. Moose were easy to stalk, but if they got his scent they would take off and might go for miles before stopping. It was possible they had already got his scent. Turning around he hurried back the way he had come, thinking as he went, "If I could only travel better. . . ." The ankle was already feeling weak and unsteady. "It's a mile and a half more to the mountain . . . and that's a lot of thick woods to try to find a small bunch of moose." But he could take a chance.

About halfway to the cabin the woods thinned out a little and in places there were open spaces with clumps of low brush. He turned off and covered the ground as briskly as he could, keeping a sharp lookout all around as far as he could see. There were the usual rabbit tracks and a few others. Some were fairly

fresh, although most were all but hidden by snow that had fallen upon them. None were given more than a passing notice.

Finally the base of the mountain was only a little way ahead. The moose had not travelled this far. His ankle was tired and he felt a little weak all over. "Maybe I should have waited a few more days." If he cut back through the timber, there was only one chance in a thousand of coming upon the game. He wished now that he had followed the tracks, and gambled on getting a shot.

He stopped to consider the situation. "It's funny I haven't seen any sign of the Pirate . . ." It was not so very far from where the traps had been set by the big dead tree. His thoughts had drifted away from the moose. But being this far, he might as well go on to the mountain. There were scattered thickets along the base and in some of the small ravines, as well as up on the benches. Almost straight ahead a big ridge rose up at not too steep an angle. He could go up far enough to have a look around.

The soft snow made it fairly easy to climb and he went straight up the backbone of the ridge, keeping a sharp lookout. He had not gone very far, however, when he quickly crouched over and hurried to get down out of sight. He had

caught a glimpse of one of the moose as it moved into a thicket at the entrance of a ravine about two hundred yards up the valley. The others were probably farther in, out of sight.

Hurriedly he went back to the timber and began circling to approach the game from the nearest point of thick cover. Normally he would have taken this as a routine procedure. But so many unusual things had happened in this strange valley, and it was so vitally important to get meat that Jack was nervous and excited.

The little band of moose were less than fifty yards away when he walked out of the screen of snow-covered trees. They quickly saw him and came down out of the ravine with long strides, plunging through the brush and kicking up little clouds of the soft snow as they raced to get away. It was not the same bunch he had seen up near the glacier. There were two young bulls among them. A big gangling cow took the lead and they were strung out in single file as they cut around the base of the ridge, heading down the valley. He threw a shell into the chamber and took careful aim. The shot crashed into the heavy atmosphere and went rolling out across the frozen valley and up into the white canyons of the mountain. One of the young bulls went down; and the others

raced on. He was glad another shot was not necessary.

Ejecting the empty shell, he walked slowly to begin the task ahead. A feeling of renewed confidence gave his spirits a big lift. "I'll take every bit of the meat back to the cabin." Another encouraging thought also came to him. "And here's my chance to get the Pirate."



## CHAPTER XIII

### END OF A TRAIL

It would be impossible to get all the meat back to the cabin before dark. To leave it unprotected meant almost certain destruction. The scent would drift on the air currents out over a wide area of the valley and carry for miles on the light breeze. The Pirate would be sure to find it the first night, with his den so nearby ; and the wolves would pick up the information, maybe as far away as the beaver pond. All the night hunters were meat eaters and several hundred pounds of it freshly laid out within reach would bring many rivals to the scene.

At least four trips would be required for Jack to carry the meat to the cabin, even if his bad foot stood up ; and the best he might hope for would be two trips before darkness put an end to his efforts. " I'll take in one load . . ." he decided ; " and bring back some wire to hang up the rest out of reach. I'll need a rope to hoist it up . . . and I'll bring the big traps."

Removing the snowshoes, he used one of them to shovel the snow away all around the moose. Then rolling the animal over on to its back he

slipped out his hunting knife and went to work. Here was enough food to last for many weeks and he was determined to save it all.

Within little more than an hour he was ready to make the first trip. The moose had been quartered and trimmed down, with a hefty fifth load, all laid out in a cleared place. The snowshoes were strapped on and he got his coat. There was no time to be lost. Lifting one of the heavy hind quarters, he got it on to his shoulder and settled himself under the load. "If I didn't have to carry the rifle . . ." but he picked up the Winchester and started slowly on his way.

The snowshoes sank deeper in the soft snow under the sixty pounds of added burden and this brought greatly increased demands upon the bad ankle. It would be better walking when he got back to the creek, although a course was taken to bring him out of the timber some distance below the place where he had started for the mountain. For the first hundred yards or so he moved along rather slowly and a couple of times he stopped to shift the burden into a more comfortable position. Then he gradually increased the pace.

When the cabin came into view it was almost as welcome a sight as when he had limped in from the misadventure at the head of the valley.

To make another round trip seemed beyond possibility. Easing the hind quarter off his shoulder on to the stack<sup>o</sup> of wood beside the door, he went on inside. The first thing he did was make sure there was some coffee left in the pot ; and starting the fire, he stretched out wearily on the bunk without taking off his coat. Closing his eyes, and with a big sigh of relief, he wondered if it was all really worth while. It would not have taken much encouragement for him to abandon the rest of the meat.

The day had slipped well into afternoon before Jack started back again. A rest and hot coffee had renewed both optimism and determination. There was more than just safeguarding the meat for his own welfare. He could not help thinking about the night hunters who would gather on the scene, to take possession by right of might and sharpest claws. The Pirate was sure to be among them. There might never be so good an opportunity to catch him ; and Jack could not pass it by. If he did nothing else, he was going to set all his heavy traps, and hang the meat out of reach. The mackinaw coat and rifle were left behind ; and it was a lot easier backtracking on the broken trail. The snow was still falling, not hard but steadily ; and darkness would come early. As he swung along on measured snowshoe strides, he planned where

each of the traps would be set and just how the meat would be hung.

Jack went right to work as soon as he arrived. There was a nearby spruce with big limbs and he trimmed away the branches underneath. With the rope swung over the big limb he hoisted each of the heavy sections of meat up into position ; tied the rope to the base of the tree ; and then climbed up to hang them securely with a section of wire, high enough above the ground so that even Blackie the wolf would not be able to jump and reach them. One of the lighter front quarters was left on the ground to be carried back to the cabin.

A big No. 4 trap was set underneath the hanging meat, with the chain fastened to a long Jack pine for a drag ; and everything was carefully covered over with loose snow. The other three heavy traps were set among the discards where the moose had been cut up. Some snow was shovelled back where it had been cleared away, and the discards were arranged to provide a hiding-place. Two of the traps were put quite close together, and the last one on the opposite side. A heavy log was dragged up to serve as an anchor for the double set and a wire was run to the third one. Then using a snowshoe he sifted fresh snow to cover the traps and chains and added thin sheets of the

red stained snow to complete the set. Never had he taken so much care in concealing traps ; but when it was all finished he was quite proud of his handiwork.

The heavy grey of a snowy winter evening had settled upon the valley when he made a pack strap of the rope and got the awkward load on to his back.

The scent of fresh meat drifting out into the valley, attracted attention quicker than Jack had anticipated. The Pirate came out of his den to wander down the canyon somewhat earlier than usual. The big wolverine took the familiar trail along the side of the valley and caught the scent before he hardly got started. He quickened his steps, for he knew there were others who would follow that rich fresh aroma to its source. He almost ran through the snow, to be the first to get there. As he came closer, however, he became more cautious, and swung out into the timber to make a screened approach. His black lips drooled as he breathed in the appetizing odours that had become strong and tantalizing ; and he snarled in his usual way as he gloated over the pleasant anticipation of driving all others away. But then he stopped abruptly as he caught sight of something moving, out in the open, up ahead through the trees. Slowly crouching down in the snow, he hardly

breathed as he stared. It was Jack, putting the finishing touches to his work.

Slowly the Pirate backed away, pushing himself through the snow, but never for an instant taking his eyes off the man, and retreating only far enough so he could still barely see through the screen of white-covered boughs. His hot breath panted in steamy puffs on the frosty air, and his round eyes flashed defiantly. He knew what 'had happened and was sure that the man would soon leave. Impatiently he waited and worried. Here was food fit for the master of the Quehatch; but here also was dangerous ground to tread.

When Jack strapped on his snowshoes, lifted the load on to his shoulder, and started away, the Pirate raised up and moved forward a little, staring intently to make sure what was going on. After Jack had disappeared, the wolverine stood for some time, hardly moving a whisker. It was difficult to restrain himself; but there was nothing else to challenge his right to all the feasting that lay so close.

Finally he circled through the trees, moving cautiously step by step. It was darker now and snowing a little harder. He sank the full length of each leg as he walked, but travelled almost as silently as a bird in flight; and he stopped occasionally to sniff, look, and listen.

Coming to the snowshoe trail, he gave it a very special inspection. Then he walked boldly along it, out into the open. He stopped before he got too close, to survey the whole scene very critically. Being a good judge of meat, he looked longest at the quarters dangling in the air from two limbs of the big spruce.

Moving out into the untracked snow he inspected where the log had been dragged from the edge of the timber. Then he moved closer, keeping clear of the trampled places and inspecting every inch of the way as he moved about. He did not find the traps, but neither did he give way to the urge to go in and enjoy the feast that was spread so temptingly only a few steps away. Instead, he circled and came up to the back of the tree where the meat was hanging. Soon he was climbing.

Part way up he stopped to gaze at the dangling hulks and make the futile gesture of pawing out with one foot; then he went on. The Pirate was much too fat for climbing trees. He could do it, but had found there were easier ways of making a living. This was of course a different matter and he didn't have far to go. Pulling himself up on one of the limbs, he crawled out to where the wire was wrapped around and pulled tightly by the weight that hung below. Reaching down his right paw he

clawed at the wire. He tried to set his teeth on the wire on top of the limb ; and reached down to chew at it underneath, but the strands slipped between his teeth. If it had been a rope, the powerful jaws would have cut through in no time. His head was moved one way and then another, but he was unable to get a solid bite on the wire. His temper flared and he tore chunks of bark off the limb, to spit out the pieces and then try again to cut the wire.

So deeply absorbed had the Pirate been, that he did not notice another visitor appear at the edge of the timber. It came silently ; and only the keenest eyes could have seen the grey creature standing in the shadows behind the curtain of falling snow. The legs were long for the size of its body, and its feet were so big they seemed to be wearing bulky mittens. The head was round, with tasselled ears and long pointed side whiskers, and its whole body had a soft, well-furred appearance. The lynx presented a rather shy attitude. No other creature in the Quehatch had sharper claws and teeth ; but those long legs and soft skin told an unmistakable story. Old Whiskers was not the gladiator type. He and his ancestors, through too many generations, had made their living by running down rabbits and catching birds. Like all of the big cats, however, he was capable



of putting up a fast-slashing fight, upon demand—and he had a taste for fresh meat.

For some time he watched the wolverine busily working in the tree ; and then he walked boldly out into the open, toward the place where the discarded parts of the moose had been left. He had not gone far when the Pirate saw him and burst forth with a coughing growl that brought Old Whiskers to a stop. They stared at each other ; then the lynx went on. When another burst of throaty challenge failed to stop the intruder, the wolverine made a surprisingly agile dash to the tree-trunk and started for the ground. He came down backwards, in bear fashion, ripping the dry bark and growling all the way. He hit the ground heavily and sent the snow flying as he raced after the departing lynx. Spreading the toes of his big feet like snowshoes, Old Whiskers disappeared into the timber in undignified haste.

Still growling and chewing his words the Pirate walked slowly back toward the tree. There was a moment's hesitation as he debated where he should try next, but up he went again.

There were others who came to look hungrily from the deep shadows of the timber and sniff the appetizing aroma ; but when they saw the Pirate busily engaged on his overhead perch,

they stayed in the shadows or reluctantly wandered away.

Far down the valley Blackie and his pack were making one of their regular tours of hunting, when the big wolf stopped and stuck his nose into the feeble current of air. He moved his head slowly back and forth, sniffing heavily to pick up every faint trace. It did not take him long to make certain there was no mistake, and he started off at a brisk trot, on an unexpected prospect of a hearty meal for all his band.

Blackie did not stop in the shadows as the others had done. With the three whelps at his heels and the Old Lady close behind, he trotted out into the open to have a look around. They stood quite close to the tree where the wolverine was still chewing persistently at the wire. The Pirate barked a loud and threatening challenge ; but Blackie only stiffened and the coarse hair went up along the back of his neck. The young ones started forward, but a quiet growl stopped them and they pranced around impatiently. Another throaty bark from up in the tree was ignored, as the black leader's gaze moved slowly about, taking in all that was to be seen, and the hair stood up on his back. The wolverine made a dash for the tree-trunk and started coming down, making a noisy fuss as he did so ; but none of the wolves made any move to leave ;

and the Pirate stopped to reconsider his course. Still unimpressed by the threat, Blackie walked closer to the tree and gazed up at the quarters of meat hanging suspended in the air. The wolverine climbed slowly back to his perch, and stood glaring down, grumbling and grimacing at the defiant intruders. Calmly Blackie measured the distance from the ground to the meat and then turned away.

Followed by his pack the black leader walked to where the rest of the meat lay unprotected on the ground. He did not go very close ; and the others stayed behind. They all sniffed at the human tracks and were careful where they stepped. Blackie circled slowly around, sniffing cautiously. He knew this was dangerous ground. The young ones followed, sticking out their noses as far as they could reach and showing increased signs of impatience ; but they did not defy the warning.

When the big black had gone clear around, he moved closer, stepping lightly and hesitating before each new step was made. He growled almost continually, to keep the others back until he was sure of a safe approach. Stretching out his nose, he moved it about. The scent of the fresh meat was strong ; but he must be careful, for there was also the fearful smell of man. Another cautious step, and almost before his

foot was solidly on the ground there was a sudden snap. He lurched back ; but was not quick enough. With a barking growl that was sharp as the report of a gun, the big black leaped into the air. There was the clinking sound of a metal chain. Every muscle in his powerful body burst into violent action. The others jumped back and stood staring, as though they did not understand ; and the Pirate looked down from 'his perch, as mute and stolid as though he had suddenly frozen stiff. Blackie lurched and pawed and snapped his jaws, tearing up the snow and jerking the heavy log to which the chain of the trap was attached. His strength had never failed him in time of crisis ; and he was determined to free himself from this sudden captivity, as quickly as possible.

Jack crawled wearily into his sleeping-bag that night. He had finished every chore. The two new quarters of moose were safely hung up ; the dishes were washed ; there was fresh water for morning, wood behind the stove to dry, and plenty of fresh red titbits laid out as a special feast for Bright Eyes. The ankle was considerably more swollen than it had been when he started in the morning, but he was confident that the time of confinement and worry was passed. Tomorrow he would bring in the

rest of the meat. "Gosh, I may even have that old wolverine. . . ." He had a peculiar feeling of confidence about the traps that had been set ; and it was easy to imagine the pelt of the Pirate hanging as a permanent trophy in his own room at home. "Then the next day I'll go up to the head of the valley and get the other traps. Maybe I'll set them up there again. . . ." But he drifted off into a deep and contented sleep before that problem was entirely decided.

He was up early. The ankle was stiff and lame, but the swelling had gone down during the night and he knew he could travel again. "I'll just have to be careful of it, for a while."

About three inches of fresh snow had fallen, but it had stopped and the clouds had risen so the tops of the mountains could be seen again. The snow was beginning to pile up around the cabin in real winter fashion and he would soon have to cut a passageway from the door to the creek, or begin melting snow for water. It would be well to cut some more wood, too.

The heavy grey of early morning lingered over the valley when he left the cabin. He took a rope to aid in packing the heavy loads. He swung along briskly, for he was extremely anxious to find out what had happened ; and three round trips were a full day's work.

The pace was increased as he began to approach the destination. There was a little breeze and he instinctively took deep breaths of the fresh air to see if it carried any taint of wolverine. Living in the woods gave one the natural reasoning that the sense of smell can "see" farther than the eyes in thick timber. Then his heart took a jump as he caught the sound of a rattling chain. He almost ran to see what it was.

A little startled, he caught a glimpse of the big black wolf through an opening in the trees. It brought him to a standstill. "I've got him!" Excitedly he started on, but made only a step or two when he stopped again. "The others may be close by . . ." A sudden desire for the rifle in his hands flashed into his thoughts. Even the little belt axe would hardly be a means of self protection, if the others had stayed and they should decide to attack. It was possible. He already had the axe clutched tightly in his hand, and he was seriously debating the best course to follow. Blackie was evidently aware of his presence, for he was thrashing about. "He might pull out. . . ." This was an unpleasant thought. Jack's eyes searched through the timber in every direction and he strained to catch the slightest sound.

He moved forward, step by step. His heart

was pounding. The big black leader of the wolf pack was straining desperately, snarling and snapping his teeth together. Jack increased his pace a little and was soon at the edge of the timber where he had an unobstructed view. "He's in two of the traps." A front and a hind foot were caught. Jack's eyes took a hasty glimpse at where the meat had been hung. It was all safe. His gaze made a wide sweep all around. If the other wolves had stayed, they were nowhere in sight. Another question flashed into his thoughts. "How will I manage this?" Getting close to the big wolf could be dangerous. Again he wished for the rifle. "Maybe I can use the rope."

Going closer, still holding the hand axe tightly, he made a critical estimate of how securely the wolf was held in the big double spring traps; then slipping the axe back into its holster, he hurriedly got off the snowshoes and unwound the rope from around his waist. While making a noose in one end, he realized his hands were trembling. The rope was stiff; and Jack was no expert at throwing a lasso. "If I can only get it around him . . . and if only those traps will hold."

Getting close enough to throw the rope was not easy. Blackie kept at the opposite extremity of the chains, occasionally making a

wild lunge that sent Jack jumping back, as the powerful wolf crashed into the end of the chains. Each of these attempted attacks brought a fearful feeling. There was no doubt about the big wolf's intentions ; and if he could break free, he would probably tear to pieces this malevolent human. Several times Jack threw the rope. Blackie grabbed it in his teeth and chewed viciously. But finally the noose went over his head and was quickly pulled tight. Holding the wolf was more difficult than Jack had expected. The wolf's strength was amazing ; and the holding power of the traps became something of a miracle. Putting one foot on the rope Jack forced it down to the ground and began pulling it as tight as possible. He edged closer and closer. The snow made the rope slippery, and it cut his hands. He moved inch by inch, until his foot was almost touching the big black's head. Then he got the trap axe in one hand, with the blunt side down. It was all over as quickly as though he had fired a shot from the rifle.

As Jack gazed down at the big black leader of the wolf pack, his feeling of triumph was dimmed by a streak of remorse. " He was a magnificent brute. . . ." There was real admiration in the thought. " I'll never part with his hide." Then he added, " It's too bad old



fellow . . . but if it wasn't me, it would have been something else . . . Maybe one of your own offspring." Jack knew how very few of all the wild creatures in Nature's domain, no matter how powerful they might grow to be, ever escape a violent climax in life's course of events ; and that virtually none ever come to a peaceful end of the trail.

Catching the big black of the Quehatch and handling him without a gun, was something to be thought about for a long time. Jack was still tense from the excitement as he admired the powerfully built wolf. The hair was remarkably heavy and coarse, fully five inches long on the massive neck ; and his yellow tusks were like those of a grizzly.

Still shaking a little, Jack walked over to the hanging meat. Almost before he started he noticed the tracks at the base of the tree, and he went directly to them. The wolverine had been forgotten ; but it was brought forcibly back to mind before Jack stooped down to give the tracks a closer inspection. " It's the Pirate all right ! " Jack stood up ; his eyes moved to the limb from which the two heaviest quarters were suspended. A slight smile crept into his face as he noticed where the wire was crimped from being chewed just below the limb.

Jack made a quick tour of the immediate

area to read the signs and to find out in which direction the Pirate and the wolves had gone when they left the scene. Then he returned to the task that lay ahead. He unfastened the two traps which had caught the wolf and began skinning the animal. While he worked, however, his thoughts were on the wolverine. He decided to leave the one undisturbed trap where it was. He would carry in the two moose quarters and leave the other meat hanging in the tree. The trap that had been set directly underneath, would be moved to the base of the tree where the Pirate had climbed up. "He'll be back all right . . . for he didn't get even a taste of any of the meat. I'll bet his disposition is really in a bad way . . . that's for sure."

## CHAPTER XIV

“QUE-QUE-HATCH !”

A CANDLE was burned that night. Making a stretcher to dry the big wolf skin was a major project. The pelt had to be “cased,” because there was not a wall space large<sup>o</sup> enough or enough nails to tack it out flat. It required a stretcher more than eight feet long. This was improvised of two natural poles cut in the woods, trimmed down with axe and knife, and fashioned into an elongated A, by fastening them together at the top with a short piece of wood and a longer spreader near the bottom. The idea worked all right, but it took time.

While he was working on the stretcher, with the black pelt in his lap, Bright Eyes came out. A special dinner had been put out and Jack stopped to watch as the streamlined little visitor in royal white made his appearance. He had hardly got out from under the bunk, however, when his beady eyes fastened in the direction of the wolf skin and his black nose began twitching excitedly. “Oh . . . you knew him too, eh ?” Jack barely had time to whisper the words to himself when Bright Eyes made a quick

disappearance. Nor had he returned when the wolf pelt was finally pulled on to the stretcher and hung on the cabin wall above the bunk, and the candle was blown out for the night.

The next morning was clear and considerably colder. The days were getting shorter. In its swing above the southern rim of the mountains, the sun would look down into the valley for little more than three hours now, and that time would get less later on. The moon hung like a delicately engraved silver ball in the pale blue of the eastern sky and a soft light filled the valley as Jack started off along the snowshoe trail. He took most of the smaller traps that were left and a good supply of meat trimmings for bait—having decided to go by the place where the moose had been shot and then continue to the head of the valley. The last load of meat could be picked up on the way home, or it could be left for another few days.

The dry snow had a pleasant tinkling crunch under the snowshoes. The frosty air bit sharply into his nostrils and gave a fresh, very alive feeling to his whole body. The ankle was still a little touchy, as he started out ; but it was grand to be able to travel again and at last to get really under way with the trapping.

From the amount of fresh tracks, it appeared

as though every wild creature that lived in the Quehatch had been out during the night ; and the trip to the traps seemed barely half as long as it had been before. As Jack swung along with long even strides he had a feeling of confidence. After all, he had got what was probably the biggest and smartest wolf in all the Alaskan mountains. Surely he could catch any wolverine that roamed.

As he approached the traps, he stopped to listen, before he was close enough to see through the stand of trees. All was silence. Still confident he went on. But there was nothing in the traps. Standing where he could look around, he picked out the fresh tracks. It was easy to identify those of the wolverine. The Pirate had been back and had feasted to his heart's content, although he had kept safely clear of both the traps. He had not gone near the tree. There were also some other tracks—of lynx and fox. It looked like more than one fox, but that didn't matter. It was the wolverine that was important. He would surely be back again. There was a strong temptation to set the other No. 4 trap that was in the bag, but Jack decided to leave things as they were, for another night or so at least. If that did not bring results, there were other ways to get him. In the meantime, he would go up to the head of

the valley and make some sets beyond the range of the Pirate.

Jack took a new course through the timber, diagonally back toward the creek. He saw the trails of marten, fox and lynx, and some good places to make sets. "I'll get out of the Pirate's country . . ." he kept thinking as he went steadily on his way.

The first cubby that had been built on the previous trip, underneath the old spruce with the spreading shelter of heavy boughs, was easily located. All around it the deep snow was unmarked and it was like a dry cave down around the trunk of the tree. The cubby was a wreck ; and the sprung trap lay at the end of the stretched-out chain. There were bits of marten skin scattered about. "Looks like a lynx. . . . A wolverine would have eaten everything." Then he added, "I might have had that marten, if I had only come in on the way back to the cabin." Unbuckling the snowshoes he stepped down inside and after examining one of the pieces of fur, he began repairing the cubby. "If there's one marten around here there's sure to be another. . . ." It was too good a place not to use again.

The other two cubbies on this side of the Quehatch were both completely buried by the snow ; and he had a little difficulty finding

them. One had been sprung by a pine squirrel. That was a thing to be expected. The stakes were dug out and a new cubby built at the base of another tree nearby. When the third one was located and the snow shovelled away, he was a little surprised to find the trap had not been sprung. “ Weasel . . . or birds, probably got the bait. . . . ” He took the trap to use in the big timber on the other side of the valley.

Crossing the creek, he saw two black foxes tripping briskly along together out in the open area that stretched up the centre of the valley. He quickly got the binoculars on them. Whether they had become aware of his presence or were just travelling, he could not be sure. They were beautiful to behold. Both had only a sprinkling of white hairs, big white-tipped tails and their luxuriant coats of heavy black fur fairly rippled as they tripped along against the glistening white background. He kept the glasses on them until they disappeared into the timber towards which he was going. This was too good to pass up. There was at least seven hundred dollars worth of fur. Jack's thoughts flashed back to the photograph in his cabin and he visioned those two beautiful black fox skins draped around the young lady's neck. Then he began making plans. Getting one or both

of those prize furs became more important than all the marten in the Quehatch. "They probably do their hunting out there. . . ." It was a big area and he knew that foxes could cover a lot of territory. The small No. 2 traps would hold them, if a fairly light drag was attached. He glanced up at the sun. There would be time enough to make at least two fox sets. It might be necessary to abandon building cubbies in the timber. That could wait until another day.

As he moved out across the open flat, his eyes searched ahead for a promising location and he headed for some raised ground a short distance beyond where the foxes had first been seen. He had not gone far when he came to a well-used rabbit trail; and there were the old tracks of two fox running along it. A brief stop was made where the two blacks had crossed; then he went on. There were more rabbit trails, and more fox signs. This was their hunting ground all right.

The raised ground was a miniature moraine of gravel and rock, probably pushed up when the ice of the glacier extended that far down the valley. It was hardly as high as Jack's head and came to a narrow crest; the covering of snow gave it the appearance of a tiny mountain ridge. All around was a scattering of clumps of naked brush. By going up to the



side, it would be possible to set a trap on the top.

A place about twelve inches square was stamped down on the narrow crest of the little ridge ; then a platform of twigs was laid to provide a foundation for the trap. A heavy section of alder was chopped down and carried back to use as a drag. Wire was fastened to the end of the trap chain and around the alder, which was pushed into the snow at the base of the ridge. A thin crust of snow was put over the trap to keep the loose snow from getting under the pan. With a stick the ridge was finally smoothed over and shaped so that the hidden trap was at the crest. The chain and wire were covered and the chopped end of the drag pushed out of sight.

The two largest pieces of meat in the trap bag were fastened in the tallest part of some alders which were directly opposite where the trap was set ; and a couple of other strips were hung close by. A rabbit or grouse would have been a better bait, for meat does not give off as much odour when it is frozen. If the foxes passed within a few hundred feet, however, they were pretty sure to pick up the scent ; and the nearby lookout was a natural place for them to inspect the situation before attempting to get the pieces of meat.

Jack moved on across the flat and made another similar set about half a mile beyond, using two traps on the tops of large rocks and a third one close to the bait. By the time this was completed, the sun had been out of sight for quite a while and it was too late to do anything about cubbies in the timber or to pick up the traps that had been left in the canyon where he had injured his ankle. He started straight for home.

The next morning Jack was on the trail early. He had decided to go directly to the head of the valley to look at the new sets, build some cubbies in the big timber, pick up the traps left in the canyon, and cut directly back across the canyon to the wolverine set and bring in the last of the meat. The long moonlit night had surely brought out everything in the valley. The sight of the two black foxes came back vividly in his thoughts as he swung along the trail. "First nights are always best. . . ." This trapping adage was pleasant encouragement. If only the Pirate, or some other wolverine, had not followed his snowshoe trail and raided the sets.

It was a long trip up the valley ; but he got to the first cubby before the sun had blazed its way above the white spires of the mountains. The set was just as it had been left. He moved

on ; and there was a marten in the second one. Greatly elated, he repaired the cubby and reset the trap with fresh bait. Optimistically he headed for the fox sets out on the flat. One of those beautiful blacks would be full compensation for all the effort, pain and discouragement of his misadventures in the head of the valley.

When he came to the edge of the timber the binoculars were put on the little ridge where the first trap was set. It was easily located, but appeared untouched. He had held a lot of faith in that set. It was too far away to be certain. A little discouraged he went on, to swing around beyond it, so as not to go too close, but get a better view from a different direction.

Satisfied the set was just as it had been left, he went on. It was not so easy to see the next one from a distance, because of the brush, and he had to go quite close. As the location was approached he caught a glimpse of something black through the screen of alders. His heart gave a thump as he stopped to look and listen. Almost at the same moment he heard the rattle of a chain. “ I’ve got him ! ” He moved on hurriedly and the black fox was soon in full view. There was a sudden fear that it might get away ; although the drag was being pulled freely and the trap had a secure hold. Taking no chances, Jack closed in quickly and using the handle of

his belt axe to end it abruptly, he soon had his first black fox. Holding the beautiful fur bearer, he gazed at it admiringly. "If I get nothing else all winter . . . it's really been worth while." He was also mindful of how different it would have been if the Pirate had followed his snowshoe trail and got there first. He ran his fingers through the long silky fur. "Jean will love it!" The fox was too heavy to carry all the way back to the cabin, so he decided to take it on to the little canyon and skin it there.

He reset the trap and left some more bait; he soon had picked up the blazed trail in the timber; and the old sets were located without difficulty. They were all put in order. There was considerable marten sign; but he also found the trail of another wolverine. The bear-like tracks were so plainly impressed in the snow that it was certain they were not those of the Pirate. This was evidently the territory of another of the reprehensible creatures which had given the beautiful valley its name.

Leaving the heavy timber he passed the bunch of birches where the improvised crutch had been found, and was soon approaching the entrance to the canyon. Coming out of it was a well-used trail. It was the wolverine. The trail took him right beside the big log over

which he had made that one fatal step. The fallen tree was all but buried under the snow, although he recognized it immediately. Laying down the fox he walked on to where he could see a few blackened arms of the tree where the fire had been built. He shuddered as he turned back to find the traps. They were almost underneath the wolverine trail. “ Que-que-hatch . . . ” He stared down derisively at the tracks. “ It’s funny I didn’t see them when I was here before. He must have been up where I got the first moose.”

While he skinned the fox he debated what to do about this new wolverine. It should be quite easy to find the den, but that would accomplish nothing. Even if he would see the beast, which was beyond probability, he had no gun. To make a set to catch him seemed equally futile. The wolverine had become the symbol of all the evil omens associated with this valley. “ The Indians believe them . . . and so do the old-timers. Could it be true ? ”

When the pelt was carefully removed and safely packed in the back of his coat with the marten, a set was made in a narrow passageway between the trees and the rock wall of the canyon. There was little time left for building any more cubbies, if he was to pick up the last load of meat on the way home. But quite

content with the day's success he started on a direct course across the valley. The trap bag was hung on the limb of a dead tree at the edge of the timber and he began travelling as rapidly as he could.

It was almost dark when he reached the place where the moose had been shot. The Pirate had been there all right. He had not only enjoyed another feast, but had left the heavy odour of his presence. The traps were untouched. Catching him here was now beyond hope. Getting down the meat, Jack did not bother to take up the trap at the base of the tree, but pushed on to get home while there was still enough light to travel.

Determined not to miss any possible opportunities, Jack was on the trail again early the next morning. During the night it had clouded over and there was a scattering of snow in the air as he left the cabin. He had planned to visit all the sets and try to get the rest of the traps put out. That was a big assignment for one day. As he swung along in the grey dawn, he debated whether to pass up the wolverine set at the base of the mountain. It was a long trip back there, just for one trap in which he had lost hope. But when he came to the turn-off place, he half-heartedly took the trail back through the timber. His misgivings were well

founded. The Pirate had not even been there during the night.

As he pressed on along the trail toward the head of the valley, the distance seemed longer than usual. The snow had increased and the flakes were larger. “ It’ll make better trapping weather. . . .” He tried to find encouragement in the change of the weather, although this too was like wishful thinking.

He was almost back on the main trail along the creek and not far from the first marten cubby, when he stopped abruptly. There were other tracks in the snowshoe trail. His thoughts had been so preoccupied that he had walked right on to them before he noticed them. It was wolverine. “ The Pirate ! ” Jack squatted down to examine the tracks. “ He’s visited every one of my sets . . . that’s for sure.” Jack had visions of demolished cubbies and bits of marten skin scattered about. “ And maybe the other black fox ! ” He started on with a longer stride and quicker tempo.

The wolverine tracks followed the snowshoe trail to the first cubbies. Some distance ahead he could see that the Pirate had gone down beneath the big tree for there were red stains on the snow. It had been a marten all right. Jack’s temper flared. None of the sets would be left untouched ; and the Pirate was sure to

continue making the same sort of raids, night after night, until he was disposed of. "Why didn't I pick up that Number Four by the moose meat tree?" Another big trap was in the bag far across the valley, and there were two back at the cabin. If he went back, there would not be time to visit the other sets. "*I've got to get that wolverine, before I do anything else!*"

Leaving the wrecked set as it was, he went on to the next one. It was the same story, only the hairy pirate had got only a few small pieces of bait; but the cubby was torn to pieces and the trap was turned over. Jack's temper had changed to discouragement. His mind was buzzing with plans by which he might catch the Pirate. "I'll make a couple of sets in the snowshoe trail . . . and some double sets at the cubbies . . . and a deadfall. I might as well forget everything else . . . until I get him. Tomorrow I'll bring out every one of the big traps."

The tracks went on; and Jack followed. It was now snowing so hard that everything a hundred feet away was screened from view. "If this keeps up, it'll be dark early."

At the first of the fox sets the Pirate had broken down the alders to get the baits. Jack was glad there had not been a black fox in the trap on the little ridge. He went on to the



next set. There the worst had happened. Bits of black fox fur were scattered all over the place. This was not all. Two wolverines had been there. The tracks were already partly covered by the falling snow, although the evidence was as plain as a printed page. The Pirate had got there first. The fox had put up quite a fight. The snow was torn up for thirty or forty feet ; and fox, trap and drag had been pulled back close to where the bait had been hung. The second wolverine had come on to the scene while the fight was taking place, or very shortly after it ended. Its tracks showed where it had stopped a short distance away ; and then as the Pirate pulled the fox back also to protect the baits, the intruder had followed off to one side, through the brush and made two complete circles around the scene. When the Pirate finally left, he went out across the flat towards his own side of the valley. The other one had come in to look around ; then he left the scene to return to the south side. If there had been anything left of the fox, it had been carried away.

The second wolverine had been backtracking on the snowshoe trail and it had undoubtedly visited all of the other cubbies in the timber. It was useless for Jack to go any farther. To find another marten torn to shreds was more

than he could take. The weather had got worse. The wind had come up and the snow was swirling in such dense clouds it was like a heavy curtain ; and it had begun to drift. It would not be long before the snowshoe trail would be covered over. If darkness overtook him, it would be very easy to get lost and he might never find his way to the cabin. Even now he was not too certain of the direction. It would be a lot easier and shorter to go back the way he had come. To spend another night out, in a driving blizzard, would be a lot worse than the previous ordeal. "But there's always the chance he may have missed one of the cubbies . . . and I might have him in the trap in the little canyon . . ." Jack stood, arguing with himself for several moments ; and then, against his better judgment, he went on toward the big timber and the long way home.

## CHAPTER XV

### DEFIANT IN DEFEAT

VISITING the rest of the trap line brought only further dismay and discouragement. There had been two more marten in the cubbies in the timber, and there was little left except bits of fur and stains in the snow. "Three marten and a black fox . . . all torn to shreds, in one day!" he exclaimed bitterly to himself as he left the last set and trudged wearily on toward the canyon. "That's more than all I've got since I came in here." Then another thought was added: "Maybe what they say about this valley is true. . . ."

There was no reward in the canyon; and picking up the trap bag he began the long trip across the valley to home. He had not gone very far into the timber when the old trail was lost beneath the drifting blanket and he was travelling blindly. The snowshoes became heavier at every step; his spirit was badly broken, and his feet were cold. Having trudged steadily all day, his legs and back ached, and the trap bag pulled on his shoulder as though it were filled with rocks from the stream bed of

the Quehatch. Although he could see little more than the outline of the trees as he passed them, the country looked strange and he seemed to be getting nowhere at all. There was an uncomfortable fear that he might be travelling in the wrong direction, or possibly going around in a big circle. A feeling of panic increased as the darkness settled.

He began looking for a big spruce with thickly drooping boughs, where he could find shelter for the night. By cutting away the boughs on the leeward side, a fire could be built in the entrance to throw heat inside. "I'll have to gather plenty of wood before it gets dark. . . ." Dry wood would not be easy to find in the deep snow. But he kept pushing on and finally came to a stream, which was so large he knew it was the Quehatch. Whether he was above or below the cabin, however, he was not sure. He found a place where it was frozen over solidly, but his snowshoes had to be removed to get across because of the many boulders. When he reached the opposite side he got a stick to prod in the snow in an unsuccessful effort to locate the trail. Then he pushed on rather desperately, down the valley.

The wind was really blowing now and his clothing was plastered white. At times the dark air was so filled with swirling snow that it

made breathing difficult. A new fear came to haunt him. He might pass by the cabin without realizing it.

It seemed he had gone much too far and complete darkness was almost upon him when he noticed the snow-covered top of a stump, and turning toward it he recognized the cabin a short distance beyond. He was home at last.

A lighted candle, a whirring fire in the stove, the sweet aroma of sizzling moose steak mingling with that of boiling coffee, and the waiting comfort of a warm sleeping-bag, made the little cabin a wonderful place that night. Even Bright Eyes appeared to be more congenial than usual and stayed out longer than he had before.

The storm continued through the night. In the morning Jack was a little surprised at the amount of snow that had fallen ; and it kept piling up, deeper and deeper, through the next day and the ones that followed.

The trap line had been left in a sad state, which was nothing to be happy about. But if all the sets had been put in order and the traps reset, they would now be as useless as frozen stones, deep underneath the snow. Nor was there any cheerful hope in looking forward to the end of the storm and a resumption of good trapping weather. There was no way of evading

the hairy pirates ; and catching them was an equally discouraging prospect.

The days dragged by and the snow continued to pile up. The moose meat had to be raised to a higher limb, to lift it out of reach ; and the rope that had been used had to be replaced with wire, for the tin that encased the trunk of the tree would soon be so nearly buried it was useless in keeping off marauding prowlers. The shelter underneath the overhanging roof became like a cave, with the snow walled around and deepening inch by inch so that it completely buried the cabin. Every morning Jack had to dig out an excavation around the window to let in a little light. And a new calendar had to be marked out on the log above the window. November had passed and December was on its way. He was not sure whether one or more days had failed to be marked off. Thanksgiving had gone unawares ; and he could not escape a strong desire that he might get home for Christmas. There was plenty of time to think about other things ; and he found it increasingly difficult to brush aside all he had heard about the curse of the Quehatch—which the Indians and old-timers believed. Time after time he recalled, too vividly to be pleasant, how the old Indian packer had crossed himself when he left Jack alone, and turned to disappear silently

down the trail. Then a new and pleasantly haunting thought came to him. It was possible that Dad might fly in with a bush pilot at Christmas, to drop some things and to see how he was getting along. It would be just like him. There had been no plans for anything of the kind ; and it was too good to think seriously about ; but he couldn't keep it out of his thoughts. Even if this should happen, there was no possible place to land, and they would pass over quickly. If there was only some way of getting a message to them—if they should really come.

He planned and replanned what he would do when the storm stopped or settled down sufficiently to permit travelling again. He considered going to the beaver pond, although the snow was much too deep for practical purposes there. The busy brown workers would be carrying on their life underneath the ice, feeding upon the ample supply of food they had cut in the thickets and implanted in the bottom of their little lake. The air holes that they kept open were hidden deep underneath the snow and would be hard to find and more difficult to use for setting traps. Anyhow, he had only three of the big traps in the cabin, which would be required to hold beaver ; and there was but very little left of the wire which was a necessity

in making such sets. He also considered going down the valley to build a new line of cubbies for marten. But there were probably other wolverine down there. The Quehatch had been given its name for a very good reason. There was only one answer. Catching the pirates was still the inescapable first purpose of the future.

For ten days the constant flow of snow came drifting down to settle upon the earth. When it cleared, it was like the raising of a curtain on a new scene. The cabin was all but buried. Jack climbed out like one of nature's own creatures emerging from an underground den. It was a beautiful world, all white and glistening. The brush had all disappeared and the small trees had only their heads above the snow that stretched in a gently rolling plain between the heavily laden stands of trees. The mountains were bundled in a great white blanket. It was still and cold. The temperature had dropped to at least forty degrees below zero.

Jack wore extra socks and his fur parka and big mittens when he started breaking a new trail up the valley in the biting crispness of early morning. The air made the end of his nose tingle and his breath frosted the stubble of his black beard. He kept the hood of the parka up over his head and the long ruff of Siberian wolf skin felt pleasant around his face. The



trap bag that hung from his shoulder contained the three large traps and an ample supply of bait.

The white mountain world presented an ever-changing panorama of scenic grandeur as he travelled up the centre of the valley. This was what he had come to enjoy—the Alaskan mountain winter in all its primitive and cruel beauty. It was much too cold to make another mistake. His eyes took in each new vista as it opened up through the timber, and his thoughts were on the creatures to whom all this was a part of the only life they knew. Their never-ending struggle to survive, in the deep snows and the bitter cold, was something to marvel at ; but how brief would be his own existence, under similar circumstances ! As he gazed up into the mountains, he speculated on what Junior and the rest of the sheep were doing for an occasional meal. Their small sharp feet were not made for deep snow and the brush tips on which they subsisted through the winter must be pretty hard to get. Pushing trenches through the snow-covered thickets could be an unpleasant way to get along. The moose, too, would be yarded up. The rabbits were getting along on the bark of small trees ; and grouse had little to feed on except the needles of spruce and pine. But Jack's thoughts were principally on the Pirate.

The wolverine had visited the place where the moose had been shot. He had dug deep to gnaw at the frozen remnants, but had not gone near the trap. Disturbing the place as little as possible, the Pirate had trampled down the snow to feed. After Jack had dug out the trap beside the tree, he continued on his course through the timber toward the head of the valley.

About half a mile on, he built a cubby against a large tree. It was constructed of heavy branches, with the ends pushed deep into the snow; and instead of a roof the upper ends came together in teepee fashion. A No. 4 trap was wired to the tree and set in front of the cubby, hidden under enough snow that a marten could walk over it without springing the pan. A liberal amount of bait was scattered inside.

A hundred yards farther on he found a dead jack pine that had fallen with part of the top sticking out of the snow, and varied his course to walk over it. Stopping, he dug down and fastened a wire to the jack pine. Then he built a little platform of twigs that were within reach, and set a trap upon it, about ten inches below the surface. After scattering pieces of meat, he filled in some soft snow, until the trap was covered over. He carefully stepped on the top with a snowshoe, to obliterate the signs of

his work and went on. Looking back, he had a feeling it was a good trail set.

He kept looking for a suitable place to build a deadfall. The deep snow and sub-zero weather added to the problem. It required a base log ; another heavy one to be suspended directly above, from a tree to hold the line to the trigger, unless a figure 4 was used ; and sufficient material or a natural place to fashion a sizable pen for the bait. This was a pretty large order. Several times he changed his course to look at clumps of fallen dead trees, but always went on to find a better spot.

When he came to the ravine which ran out to the main stream from the canyon in which the Pirate had his den, Jack was inclined to go down it to explore the possibilities for a deadfall ; but instead, he kept on the original course up the valley. Another cubby was built ; and the last of the big traps was used at the set under the spreading spruce where the first of the marten had been destroyed. Jack reached home shortly before dark.

It was clear and crisp that night. When he went out just before going to bed, the sky was ablaze with a display of northern lights ; and he stood for some time watching the colourful streamers swing and sweep like dancing rainbows against the background of blinking stars. All

the night hunters would surely be out on such an occasion as this.

The next day, however, no signs of the wolverine were found at any place along the trail. There was of course plenty of other territory over which the Pirate could spend a long night of roaming; and his last visit to where the moose had been shot had provided him with far from a square meal. That he may have become ambitious and gone in quest of mountain mutton was a possibility. But Jack went on; he dug out all the small traps on the other side of the valley, to bring them in to the cabin; and made sets with the two remaining figure 4's. If either of the hairy pirates was caught, he would build a line of marten cubbies through their territory. Otherwise, he would try his luck down the valley. On one point he was very definite: he would much rather not catch any more marten at all, than have them torn to bits by wolverine.

The next few days brought one disappointment after another. Both of the wolverine visited the sets, only to eat the baits and either avoid the traps or dig them out to be left on top of the snow.

Jack went down the valley and put in a long day building marten cubbies. The first night he caught three of the beautiful fur bearers—two

of which were destroyed by wolverine. The hairy pirates were all over the valley. On his way back to the cabin, he picked up all the traps; he was now completely convinced as to why the old-time trappers stayed away from the Quehatch.

Discouraged though he was, there was still the vague chance of a deadfall. He had failed in every other effort, and so much of the moose meat had been used for bait, that this too had added to his worries. The weather was still clear and the temperature far down below zero. It was much too cold to handle an axe in bare hands, and working with heavy mittens was awkward, slow and dangerous.

He took a day off, to stay around the cabin. In the morning he chopped firewood; and in the afternoon he fashioned a sturdy set of sticks for a figure 4 to use as a trigger between the two heavy logs of a deadfall, if he could not find a location with an overhead support to suspend the falling log. As a boy Jack had often put out small figure 4 sets under boxes to catch rabbits and grouse; and he was sure the same principle would work in a deadfall. As an extra lure in the way of bait, he removed the skin from one of the hind quarters of moose meat, leaving it in the cabin overnight to soften up and provide a stronger scent.

On the trail early once again, he headed straight for the ravine that ran from the Pirate's canyon out through the timber to the main stream. There was now another doubt which bothered him. The wolverine may have lost interest in following his trail for nothing more than a few pieces of bait. Unless he found an occasional marten, or something equally appropriate to his appetite, he might start passing up the cubbles or even a deadfall.

Finally turning down the ravine, however, Jack began a new search. As expected, there were numerous fallen trees ; but he had gone almost to the main stream before finding a promising location. The spring freshets had cut into a sizable rise of the ground and caused several trees to topple down the embankment. Two of these, long dead, lay in a good position, almost parallel to the bank and just above the surface of the snow. There was also plenty of material for constructing a pen in which to put the bait. This was by far the best location that had been found, and having taken off his parka, he went to work with the hand axe.

It was a considerable job to get the logs into position, build the pen, and get the figure 4 set between the logs, and still retain some semblance of a natural appearance. It took nearly all day. But finally he had both the moose skin and the

largest pieces of bait fastened to the trigger stick so that the slightest pull would drop the overhead log. There was one disadvantage. A marten, or even a squirrel, could trip the deadfall ; although anything as large as a wolverine would have to straddle the lower log to do so. Looking over the completed work, it had the appearance of an awkward contraption ; and the place was so trampled a crew of woodcutters might have been there. But putting on his parka, he went on out to the Quehatch and back to the cabin. If this didn't bring results, he had no new ideas to try.

The brief winter day had gone its way and the northern lights had begun to dance against the shining stars, as the Pirate came out of his canyon home. When he came to the place the trail turned off in two opposite directions, one down and the other up the valley, the big wolverine stopped to give thoughtful consideration to which course to take. His hot breath condensed into puffs of thin grey vapour as he sniffed the icy air. He was not concerned about the colourful display of magic patterns across the dark vault of the sky. His thoughts were on much more earthy and realistic matters. An empty stomach was much more important. It had been one of those times when luck seemed

to go against him and a good meal was hard to find. Entirely too much time and effort had been wasted following those snowshoe tracks for nothing more than a few bits of frozen meat ; and it would take much more to satisfy him tonight. The night before, he had gone almost up to the glacier and hunted hard and long, but without success. After a brief pause, he took the old trail down the valley.

Before reaching the big dead tree at the foot of the rock slide, the wolverine turned down into the timber to wander out across the valley. He stopped to take a hasty sniff at most of the trails he crossed. He followed along the trail of a marten who had been chasing a squirrel ; but they went up a tree and he moved on in search of better prospects. There were a good many rabbit trails, some beaten down solidly by use ; and occasionally the tracks of a lynx ran alongside ; but he found none where the chase had been recent enough to provide possibilities. Experience had made him a good judge of these things. He had never caught a rabbit by his own efforts, although he had taken so many of them away from lynx, fox and marten that they were considered one of the favourite items on his wide and varied diet. Just now he could think of nothing nicer.

When he finally came to the snowshoe trail,



he hesitated again. He knew that Jack had been along here during the day just ended ; and after all, until recently he had profited very pleasantly from following this man's tracks. So once again he went padding along the trap-line trail.

Where the trail forked, the wolverine followed the fresher tracks that led down the ravine. Every foot of this place was familiar to him, although he had not made the trip through it since the deep snow had come.

He ambled slowly along, becoming increasingly impatient and beginning to turn his attention to more promising ventures, when the deadfall showed up beside the little cliff. He stood for some time, swaying his stubby nose about and eyeing the queer contraption with mingled curiosity and suspicion. He had raided scores of trappers' sets, taking the captured fur bearers or the baits, uncovering and upsetting the traps ; but his previous experience had not included a deadfall. The trampled snow was a bit confusing and so much human scent was enough to drive him away ; but the smell of moose was also strong. Every log and piece of wood that had been moved and put into the structure was recognized. This was something new and it excited his curiosity. There was also that prospect of an easy meal. A couple

of times he half turned away, only to come back and take a cautious step or two a little closer. Sniffing intently, he failed to find the faintest scent of a steel trap. Finally he moved close enough to stick out his educated nose within a few inches of the big log lying half submerged in the snow, and the other one tilted upward at an angle directly over it. He noticed the whittled sticks which formed the figure 4. They reeked with human scent and he kept away from them. Beyond was the heap of moose skin, on top of which lay a large piece of meat. He liked the looks of that piece of meat. He backed away and tried to get into the pen from one side and then the other. But the easiest approach was between the logs and he was soon back, making another cautious search for the scent of a steel trap.

Finally satisfied that this was a harmless contraption, he carefully put one foot over the bottom log and tried to reach the meat. Encouraged, he put the other foot over. Stretching out his neck he quickly grabbed the meat and jerked back. Like a flash the overhanging log came down across his back. It so completely knocked the wind out of him that he was half conscious.

Fighting desperately to regain his senses, he soon began struggling to lift the weight that

held him captive. His front feet only sank their full length into the snow and his hind legs were limp and helpless. He snapped and chewed at the logs, and snarled as he never had snarled before. It didn't do a bit of good. Finally he settled down to try to think of some way of getting out of the predicament.

He squirmed and pushed, trying one possibility and then another, occasionally flying into a fit of rage. After a while, however, he reached out his claws to try to catch hold of the frozen moose skin. It was all he could do to reach it, but finally it was pulled toward him. He had no interest in the piece of meat, although he laboriously worked the heavy skin in close to the log so that it made a solid foundation for his front feet. Then he pushed down with all his strength. Yes, the log across his back was lifted up a little. Encouraged, he pulled the skin into a better position and tried again, pushing his body backward a little as he did so.

It was the most difficult and most painful task the old Pirate had ever experienced. It took all the strength and stamina he possessed, but after a long and desperately determined struggle, he managed to get his front feet firmly planted on the log underneath his body; and then he slowly pushed himself free.

For a while he lay on the snow, panting and

gasping. When he tried to get up, however, he could make no use of his hind legs and there seemed little strength left in any part of his body. He could not move the back legs, let alone stand up on them. In one final tirade of snarling, he bit savagely at the logs of the deadfall, spitting out the bark in his noisy rage.

His one desire now was to get back to the home den, and he started dragging himself through the snow. It was a slow process and he frequently stopped to try to regain his strength and to make his hind legs work in the way they should. 'Pulling himself up as erectly as he could, he bulged out his hairy chest, and with ears pulled tightly back he bared his yellow teeth in a snarl of defiance.' Then he dragged himself on, foot by foot, in the direction of the home den.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A BLANKET ON THE SNOW

THE snow had something of an added sparkle and the white mountains rose in a cold majesty that was more beautiful than before, as Jack went swinging up the valley. He kept along the bank of the Quehatch, going directly to the ravine where the deadfall was built. The parka hood was pushed back off his head ; fresh new socks were soft and warm on his feet ; the snowshoes seemed lighter than usual ; and he had a pleasant exhilarating feeling that something good was about to happen, or some important problem was about to be settled. He tried to whistle a little tune, although his lips were stiff from the cold.

After he turned into the ravine, he did not have to go very far before the deadfall came into sight. He jumped forward and hurried to find out what had happened. One sweeping glance was enough to tell him that the Pirate had been caught and escaped. Then step by step he read the whole story by the signs in the snow. " Can you beat that . . ." he marvelled as he noticed how the wolverine had

pulled the piece of frozen moose skin in close to the lower log to get a foundation for his front feet to push up the log that pinned him down. But he had escaped; and Jack's eyes quickly followed along the trail where the Pirate had dragged himself away. "The poor devil. . . ." He got the hand axe out from under the parka to chop a sturdy section of one of the limbs that had been used in building the pen. "He surely hasn't gone far. . . ." Jack was very confident as he hacked out the cudgel. "I've really got him at last!"

As he moved up the ravine he expected to see the Pirate at every turn. It had been a slow process dragging himself along through the snow and his feet had sunk almost the full length of his short legs at every step, although he had followed the snowshoe tracks. But the odd trail went on and on. It reminded Jack of his own difficult and painful trip down from the head of the valley on an improvised crutch. Only the Pirate had no means of providing himself with any aid to travelling.

It was apparent the wolverine had stopped occasionally, probably to rest, but also to try and get his paralysed hind legs to stand up as they should. A hundred yards or so from the deadfall, however, there was the clear impression of one hind foot in the snow; but that was all.

A pine squirrel scurrying up a nearby tree startled Jack ; and he grinned sheepishly as he hurried on.

A little surprised, Jack suddenly realized he had travelled all the way to where the old snowshoe trail crossed the ravine. " I'd never have believed he could have gone this far ! " There was a touch of admiration in the thought. " It looks as though he headed for the canyon and his den. "

The strange trail continued on across the untracked snow, almost like that of a giant snail. Jack was still confident of overtaking him, although the places where all four feet showed their occasional imprints were becoming more frequent. There was no doubt the wolverine was making a strenuous effort to stand up and walk the rest of the way home.

Finally the mouth of the rocky canyon showed up through the trees ahead and Jack could see where the trail came out and branched up and down the valley. A hundred feet or so before the Pirate had reached this spot, he had stood solidly on all four feet, and had walked the rest of the distance without leaving the sign of a single hair being dragged in the snow. When he reached the old familiar trail, there was the clear imprint of all his feet, as though he had stood there for several moments, triumphant,

and stared defiantly down the valley in the direction of the log cabin.

Jack stood gazing thoughtfully at the tracks for quite a while. A smile crept over his face as he tossed away the club and it disappeared beneath the surface of the snow. "I guess you win. . . ." He shook his head dubiously. "You sure are a character out of another world . . . that I guess I don't quite understand." Then he turned down the valley, to pick up some traps on the way back to the cabin.

That evening as Jack sat in the candlelight and waited for Bright Eyes to come out for supper, his thoughts retraced the events of the past, and the display of courage and the will to survive which he had observed during the day. He got the small brown claw out of the pocket of his mackinaw and held it in the palm of his hand. "When I get back to town, I'm going to have it capped with gold and carry it . . . as a reminder of the Pirate of the Quehatch."

Jack also made another decision. He had set his last trap in the valley. He had satisfied the urge which had brought him there, and was ready to go home and settle down to a more prosaic life. He could go out on snowshoes. The trip could probably be made in two days. According to his calendar it was the



twentieth of December. The next day could be spent in getting things in order for leaving ; and he could be home for Christmas. Home for Christmas ! That was a magic thought. It would be a long tough trip and he did not relish spending a night out. But he was sure he could make it—by taking along only a little food and the skins he had caught. He couldn't leave those behind. A dog team could be sent in for the other things. The more he thought about it the more strongly the idea appealed to him.

It would be nice to stay longer and get better acquainted with Henry and some of the other wild inhabitants of the Quehatch, even if he didn't trap any more. But he had already enjoyed the experience which he had dreamed about for so long. In the future he would leave this sort of thing to the back-country men and the Indians. Right now the most important thing of all was to get home for Christmas.

There was still the possibility of the plane coming in. He had begun to hope that would not happen. If it did, he was afraid they would drop a lot of new supplies by parachute ; and what if they dropped a lot of Christmas presents ? He couldn't carry such things out with him ; and it might complicate the whole situation.

The next morning he began packing all his personal things into the big duffle bag. The sleeping-bag and extra blanket could be rolled and tied up just before he left. He would take down the meat and leave it where the Pirate and the wolves could fight over it, and enjoy it after he was gone. But he would remember to lock the hook on the door.

The day was almost half gone and he was getting the cabin well cleaned and in order, when he stopped abruptly and held his breath to listen. A faint droning sound caused him to grab the mukluks and jam them on to his feet, and he raced outside to climb up on to the surface of the snow. It was a plane ! Running out to get a better view down the valley he saw it, flying low and coming up over the creek. Its red wings and orange body was a familiar sight. " It's Dad ! " he half shouted, so excited he hardly knew what to do.

The little plane came in low and made a sharp bank. A bundle popped out of the side and fell free. Quickly an orange-coloured parachute flared open and came drifting down. He tried to recognize the faces peering out of the window and fancied he saw someone wave to him. Then he went racing to the bundle which had landed in the creek bed almost in front of the cabin, at the same time he tried to watch the plane

as it swung out over the valley toward the beaver pond. Would it come back? Was there some message attached to the bundle, and could he find it quickly? He ran so fast that he sank into the snow well over the mukluk tops; but he couldn't get to the parachute quick enough. Yes, there was a small sack tied to the top of the duffle bag that had been dropped. It looked as though letters were inside. Excitedly he untied the sack and pulled out the envelopes, while he still tried to keep the plane in sight. There were two letters. He recognized his father's handwriting on one; and the other was addressed in a familiar feminine hand. He tried to open them both at the same time.

"Merry Christmas, Son . . ." read one. "Merry Christmas My Dear . . ." the other began. His eyes raced through the lines and stopped to pick up the words: "Would you like to come home for Christmas? If you do, put a red blanket out on the snow where we can see it. I will send in a dog team to get you. . . ." That was enough. Clutching the letters he raced back to the cabin. As hurriedly as possible he came out carrying the red blanket, and spread it full on the snow at the edge of the creek.

Still trying to read both the letters and watch

the plane at the same time, he stood beside the signal and waited. "I will send in a dog team to get you. . . ." He read the words again, to be sure. His eyes flashed over the other letter. "I'm up here with your Dad. . . ." His eyes jumped farther down. "I'm terribly anxious to see you. Please come home for Christmas. . . ."

Swiftly the little red and orange plane came back over the creek. When it was almost directly over, the bush pilot made a sharp dive, buzzing the motor and dipping the wings abruptly to let him know the message was understood. Then all too quickly it had passed, to swing out over the valley again, and began climbing and taking a straight course away to the west. It had come and gone. Jack watched until it was only a tiny speck against the blue sky. Then he carefully read both the letters, from beginning to end, and went out to carry the bundle into the cabin.

